はけんのこうき アルティーナ
ALTINA
the Sword Princess
覇剣の皇姫アルティーナ
VIII
Yukiya Murasaki
むらさきゆきや
ill. himesuz
ファミ通文庫

「初めまして、
軍務省より参りました
ファンリィーヌ・ウェロニカ・
ドゥ・ティラソラベルデ
事務官です」
ティラソラベルデ公爵家次女
ファンリィーヌ

「……ボクは……騎士を
続けられなくなりました」
ぐっ、と歯を食いしばる。
彼は左手を差し出した。
指が震えている。
「……力が……入らないんです」
エリック

Prologue

Recap

Even though Regis Auric was a soldier, he was incompetent in both riding horses and wielding swords, and was still a bibliophilic youth.

After his transfer to the northern borders, he met a young girl with vermillion hair and crimson eyes, who was actually the Fourth Princess of the Belgaria Empire, Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria.

She was ostracised by the courts because her mother was a commoner, and was assigned to be the commander of a frontline regiment despite being just fourteen. She wasn't disheartened by her predicament, and wanted to change the situation of the empire for the sake of the citizens that were being oppressed by the tyrannical policies of the empire.

"I want to be empress, so I am in need of your knowledge."

Altina then displayed her capability as a commander. Even though Regis lacked confidence… He still promised to be her strategist.

> February —— Second Prince Latreille who held overall command of the military issued an impossible order.

『Take down the Germanian Federation's Fort Volks in Varden Grand duchy』

It was an invulnerable fort, and attacking it with so few troops would

be suicidal.

But Regis used a stratagem he read once in a book, and guided Altina's Border Regiment to victory.

> April —— Altina was summoned back to the Imperial Palace Le Brane.

Regis who accompanied her was excited to finally visit the stage where many of the stories he read was based on… But he didn't have the leisure to do so.
The Second Prince Latreille and the First Prince Auguste were both scheming for the succession of the throne. If Altina who was fourth in line to the throne wants to be Empress, she would need to defeat them.

Regis was toyed around by them in the beginning, but after seeing through Auguste and Latreille's schemes, he turned the table and broke the game open.

After receiving the support of the new noble Eleanor, the First Prince Auguste relinquished his succession rights, and announced his support for Altina. Altina successfully became a strong candidate to be the next Empress.

> Year of the Empire 854, 23rd July ——

The Belgarian Empire received High Britannia's declaration of war.

At the same time, the neighbouring Varden Grand Duchy launched an attack on Fort Volks.

They succeeded in repelling the attack, but Eric was wounded by an archer from 'Renard Pendu' and Altina's sword 'Grand Tonnerre Quatre' was broken.
They then started a long expedition to engage the High Britannian Army, passing Rouen city along the way. There, they commissioned

Regis' brother-in-law, a blacksmith named Enzo to repair the sword.

19th May, Battle of Lafressange——

The Seventh Imperial Army formed up in a tight classical formation and launched an assault on the High Britannian Army, and was obliterated by the enemy's new rifles and cannons. The commander of the Seventh Army died in battle along with many soldiers.

"If we can't win on land, then we should attack from the sea. Without their supply ships, their supply line would naturally stop."

The Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army, Second Prince Latreille suffered serious eye injuries because of a sneak attack by the Mercenary King Gilbert. However, he hid the fact that he was wounded and held a war conference with Altina to decide the next course of action.

First, Altina's Border Regiment and the remnants of the western forces would be reorganized into the Fourth Imperial Army. Next, Regis the strategist was promoted to Third Grade Admin officer, and bestowed the name Regis d'Auric.

Altina accepted the order from Latreille's First Army that was protecting the capital, and headed for the sea.

The High Britannian 'Queen's Navy' was made up of the Princess Class steam powered battleship with 74 guns, unaffected by wind, faster, tougher and equipped with more powerful cannons.

In contrast, the battleships of Belgaria were old sail ships.

But Regis made use of the intelligence he got from the local fishermen, together with the stratagem he read in a book, he utilized a series of tactics and defeated the enemy fleet.

However, part of the enemy's supply had already been transported over the land route. If these resources were successfully sent to the front lines, the defence of the capital would face greater pressure.

The Fourth Imperial Army gave chase. The opponent was led by the Mercenary King of ‘Renard Pendu’ and his elite unit, together with the escort regiment from the regular army outfitted with the new rifles and cannons. Right now, they have made camp at the hills of west Lafressange. Had they wanted to fight this army, they would need the resolve to pay a huge price..

Regis created foggy weather by spilling a large amount of lake water in the surroundings, effectively neutralizing the advantage of the new rifles. But the Mercenary King was no fool, and took the bold strategy of attacking Altina’s headquarters… Altina finally received the modified Grand Tonnerre Quatre, and emerge victorious after fighting her opponent calmly.

The Belgarian Empire crushed the invasion of the High Britannian Army.

After seeing the Emperor indulging himself in pleasure without a care for the fate of the empire, it spurred the fury in Latreille’s heart, so he stabbed him with the Arme Victoire Volonte in his hand.

Prologue

Regis stood among countless corpses.

The stench of blood and gore filled the air.

The land was dyed red with mutilated body parts everywhere.

A bloody palm.

A head splitted in two.

Organs spilled on the ground.

Stepping over the countless pieces of meat, a man wearing a dark red robe and holding a trident walked over. His eyes full of intense murderous intent.

—— He shouldn’t be here.

Regis’ strategy was well thought out after all.

Strategy?
W-What is my strategy?

Regis couldn't remember what strategy he put into place. He could only feel the anxiety in his chest because 'a situation different from the books happened.'

The man with the trident drew closer.

Regis turned and ran without a second thought.

But his leg caught onto something and he tripped.

What was that?

Throwing his gaze that way, he saw his ankle had been grabbed by a hand reaching out from the ground.

—— Corpse!?

This time, his wrist was grabbed. It was the hand of a corpse again.

Regis tried to break free frantically.

And then, half a head that rolled before him spoke.

"Why did you use a plan that caused me to die?"

Regis screamed in terror.

"Wahhh!"

Throwing the blanket on him away, he jumped.

The rouge colour wool blanket and white posts appeared before his eyes. Looking out of the window, he could see clear skies and the slowly moving hills.

His heart was still pounding fast.

Hah, hah, he calmed his breathing that was as ragged as a hound.

Regis was lying on the bench inside the carriage.

The lady sitting on the opposite side rushed to him in a panic.

Kneeling besides him, she caressed Regis' forehead.

"Are you alright, Sir Regis?"

She was the maid Clarisse.

She was staring at Regis nervously.

Regis finally realized he just had a nightmare.

"... I… had a dream…"

"Yes."
"... The soldiers… asked… why, I formulated a… plan that made them die."

The cause of the nightmare was the scene of numerous soldiers killed in action during the last battle. They followed Regis' strategy, but many soldiers sacrificed their lives and the army paid a hefty price.

Regis couldn't even wield a sword properly and was seriously affected by the Mercenary King Gilbert's bloodlust. The troops were probably influenced by it too.

It might be wrong to say this about the soldiers who fell, but it didn't matter anymore.

Even though his ragged breathing gradually calmed down, he still felt a choke in his throat.

"Sir Regis…"

Clarisse reached out and wrapped her hands around Regis' head gently.

And pulled him to her chest.

Regis was engulfed in a sensation of softness.

He could feel her heartbeat.

Her body warmth was transmitted to him through her maid's attire. Regis thought that he could feel the warmth of his late mother…

The softness of her breasts covered Regis' nose and lips, but incredibly, his breathing started soothing.

His heart was calming down too.

Regis' tightly clenched fists also relaxed.

"Hah…"

"Have you calmed down?"

"Ah, yes… erm… Thank you very much."

Because his face was still buried in her chest, his voice was much softer.

"Fufu… that tickles."

"Erm… I am thankful to you for taking care of me… But I'm fine now."

"You don't like this?"

"T-That's not true!"

Is this answer fine, Regis was at a bit of a loss.

He might have regained his wits after that nightmare —— But his mind was still blank because his face was still stuffed in Clarisse's breasts.

In other words, his heart was pumping vigorously.

Clarisse tightened her arms.

She was always wearing an apron, but her assets still looked big. Now that he thought about it, they felt really huge and soft.

—— No, wasn't it rude to harbour such thoughts? To consider the physical characteristics of a woman who wasn't someone he would be marrying.

Regis' mind started to wander.

From a very close distance, or rather, they were already touching each other, Clarisse muttered softly.

"... Sir Regis, you don't need to bear all this alone alright?"

He finally noticed that she was helping him.

To relieve his mental pressure.

Although he still didn't understand why she was hugging him so tightly…

But this should be an act of kindness, that would make sense.

"I am grateful. However, it is the duty of my position."

This was not like the time when he was just a fifth grade admin officer, that's the thing about rank. One's responsibility would increase with their authority.

In the past, he just needed to state his opinion, it was another question whether it was accepted.

It was natural for him to feel a heavy mental pressure. Or rather, it would be dangerous if he didn't. If the one with heavy responsibility lost the normal feeling of pressure…

Clarisse who was hugging Regis gently brushed his hair and caressed his head.

"You already worked hard when you were awake… Wouldn't it be good for you to forget about this while you sleep?"

"I don't think I did enough…"

"Try your best."

"I am already doing all I can, but…"

"Sir Regis is always working hard."

"Sigh, this is the first time someone told me that."

He didn't practice swordsmanship or horsemanship in the Military Academy, and read his books all day. Everyone scolded him, saying he lacked motivation. Even though Marquis Thénezay recruited him into his army, he was lectured by his superiors plenty of times because he was always holding his books.

Things didn't change after he joined the Beilschmidt Border Regiment, although no one scolded him.

He also felt he lacked drive and ambition.

"Well, Sir Regis you… instead of striving for promotions, you are always reading books."

"Haha… That's true."

"But your will to plan a strategy where no one dies is proof of your drive, correct?"

"You are considering it from that direction?"

"It is important to mourn and respect the fallen. But you have to look at those who survived too. So Sir Regis… You should look at the people you saved."

"I didn't forget about them."

"Is that so? Because of Sir Regis' effort, I managed to stay alive right?"

"Ahh…"

Clarisse followed the expedition as the maid of the commander Altina.

Altina preferred to ride her warhorse during the march, so Clarisse always rode in the carriage with Regis.

If they lost the battle a few days ago, not just the soldiers, Clarisse would have been killed too.

"I am still alive, can you feel it?"

"Yes…"

The sound of her heart beating.

Soft and warm.

“This is because Sir Regis protected me.”
“Yes…”

“So, now is my turn to protect Sir Regis.”

“… Thank you.”

“From your nightmare.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe from the Princess too? Can I pull it off?”

“...Eh?”

Clarisse’s hands relaxed. Regis who was basking in her gentleness lifted his head.

Clarisse’s face was slightly red, and had a unique womanly charm about her.

Her brows were slightly knotted with a wry smile on her lips.

Following her line of sight, Regis looked towards the carriage door.

Altina was looking their way with ruby eyes.

“What are you doing, Regis?”

Her voice was cold. With bloodlust that could rival the Mercenary King from Regis’ dream, she gripped the hilt of her sword tightly.

“M-Me!?”

“I rushed here because I heard a scream!”

Speaking of which, he did scream when he woke from his dream.

“Well, I had a nightmare…”

“But I saw a scene filled with happiness!”

“You are misunderstanding!”

Enjoying Clarisse’s gentleness was indeed a wondrous thing, but Regis wouldn’t say something like that and put his life in peril.

Clarisse said in order to appease Altina:
“Well well, Your Highness, I did the same thing for you in the past right?”
“Ughh… But wasn’t I still a child back then?”

“I want to do it right now too… but you keep running away, princess.”

“It’s embarrassing! I am already an adult!”

Altina pouted.

Her murderous intent had vanished.

Hah… Regis sighed in relief secretly.

Clarisse composed herself and said:

“Sir Regis is always busy with work, it is only natural that he is exhausted. And his work is taxing on the mind, so he would be both physically and mentally tired, right?”

Altina thought about it.

“Hmm… Well, that’s true… starting from the defence of Fort Volks, helping the Seventh Army retreat, assuming the role of acting admiral in Épée Prière Bay, the pursuit battle of the Mercenary King… He had been fighting nonstop.”

It was now the evening of 4th July.

When they first encountered Franziska of ‘Renard Pendu’ and when Varden Grand Duchy attacked Fort Volks, it was 30th April.

In a month and a half, as they were travelling across the empire, they fought four battles.

Altina shrugged.

“And Regis was the one who came up with the plans for the battles.”

“… Well, that was all I could do.”

It would be tiring indeed.

It must be the same for the troops.

Altina had an apologetic expression.

“If I could strategize too, I would be able to lessen Regis’ burden a little…”

“No, you have been a big help. Be it the defence of Fort Volks or the battle with the Mercenary King, the headquarters was attacked in both cases. If you are a normal general, we would have already died plenty of times.”

“Thank you. But just swinging a sword won’t take down a fortress, or sink the ‘Queen’s Navy’ from High Britannia.

“We were lucky.”

They concluded the same thing last time too, Regis said with an awkward smile.

Altina asked:

“I didn’t prepare anything right now, but you can tell what you want, don’t hold back.”

I want books —— But even if he said that, he probably couldn’t get it on the battlefield.

Then, he wanted to rest.

Not just Regis, the soldiers who fought through the entire day and night must be exhausted too.

The battle might be over in the morning, but the continuous battles definitely had taken a toll on them. They stopped the march for the entire day and rested.

It would probably be a fretful rest though...

That might be so, but they couldn't spend their time idly. If they don't move off tomorrow morning, it would be hard to reach the Empire before the morning of the 9th.

They had yet to discuss further plans.

In Regis' mind, the strategy would be dependent on the state of the battle at the capital.

News that the Fourth Army defeated the High Britannian fleet and the supply troops should have reached the capital on the 6th.

The enemy probably had started retreating…

Where would they escape to?

And how would the First Army led by Latreille act?

According to his character, would he choose to pursue? But the soldiers wouldn't want to. The chance of being counterattacked on the open field was high. Latreille should know that.

Regis had to consider all the possibilities and think up countermeasures.

Altina leaned her face over.

Regis leaned back on reflex.

Her beauty was already so great that it made others jealous and anyone would be willing to buy her. After her fifteenth birthday, she was even more enchanting.

He would feel embarrassed if she got too near and stare at him.

"W-What's the matter?"
"You don't look like you are considering a reward."

"Eh? Haha… the thing I want… Erm… How about…"

"No books okay?"

"That's true, it's a battlefield after all. Erm, I'm thirsty so can I have some water?"

“Giving water as a reward, doesn’t that make me a harsh commander!? State a proper reward, I will prepare it later. Is there anything else?”

It’s hard to think of them.

He wanted to rest, but didn’t feel like sleeping right now. He was getting hungry, but it’s be fine since it would be dinner soon. In such cases, it was the standard in stories to ask for monetary reward.

But that would be a hassle.

—— Whenever the unit dispersed money, the paperwork he needed to handle would increase three folds.

The reports he needed to send back to the fortress was more tiring than the consecutive battles, which made Regis shudder.

Clap! Clarrise clapped her hands. She seemed to have thought of a good idea.

“How about the princess doing something for Sir Regis?”

“Hmm? Do what?”

“What I did just now.”

“Hah!?”

Altina’s eyes opened wide, and even her neck turned red.

Regis reacted the same way.

“W-W-What are you saying Clarisse!? This is no joking matter!”

Regis was given the peerage of Chevalier, but before the official appointment, he was still a commoner while Altina was a royal. She was the fourth princess and second in the line of succession, and a Lieutenant General commanding the Imperial Fourth Army. In terms of age, she was no longer a child, but an adult. Even if they were playing, they couldn’t touch a member of the opposite sex!

“Ara, you don’t like it?”

“N-No, that’s not what I mean!”

Altina stomped onto the carriage angrily.

“Regis, wait. You are fine with Clarisse, but not me!?”

“I didn’t mean that!”
“Then what did you mean!? I-I have grown a little bigger recently!”

“What are you saying!?”

Altina reached out and grabbed Regis’ head.

He could feel that she was very nervous. She had the same expression when she wielded a sword. Her finger strength was powerful and it was painful.

She pulled hard.

And then, the thing closing in fast before Regis’ eyes was Altina’s chest —— But it was silver.

“Wait! Your armour is still…!!”
“Ah.”

With a bang, Regis’ nose crashed hard into the steel armour.

Chapter 1 - News of the Emperor’s passing

Empire Year 851, 5th June.

Morning.

He could see people preparing for breakfast everywhere. At this moment, Regis noticed that some of the soldiers had lined up for some reason.
The line had nothing to do with their unit or ranks, just random soldiers forming a single line. Everyone held weapons, such as swords or pikes in hand.
What happened, Regis, who was curious, walked to the front of the group to find out the reason behind such a situation.

The soldier who walked back from the front of the line inspected the weapon in his hand carefully.

Regis could hear the sound of hammering in the distance.

It was a blacksmith.

Weapons had certain durability, and would be worn out after using them over long periods of time. So an army over a certain size would hire a blacksmith into their ranks.

Regis could empathise with the soldiers who wanted to repair their weapons during the lull period after a battle. But he didn't expect there to be so many, this must be due to the continuous battles they went through.

There were about a hundred blacksmiths attached to the army.

Setting up a furnace and sheltering themselves from the sun with canvas, they made an open air workshop.

Right now, there were about 13,000 people in the Imperial Fourth Army. A blacksmith would need to repair 130 weapons, which wasn't enough.

After all, this expedition was launched in a hurry without complete preparation, and the blacksmiths from the Second Army deserting after its defeat was also a contributing factor. There weren't enough chefs and barbers too.

—— We need to recruit such workers when we have time, so we

can relieve the stress of the soldiers.

As he thought about all this, Regis walked ahead and saw a burly man wielding a hammer among the blacksmiths.

“Hmm!?”

Regis hastened his steps.

After receiving a weapon from a Fourth Army soldier, the one who was hammering it was —— Enzo Smith.

He was the husband of Regis’ sister Vanessa, a blacksmith from Rouen city.

In order to deliver the repaired ‘Grand Tonnerre Quatre’ to Altina, he came all the way to the battlefield.

“Brother-in-law, what are you doing!?”

“Oh Regis, I am free right now so I came to help out.”

“What!? There are blacksmiths assigned to the unit. It’s not a proper retail engagement, if someone from outside the army did this…”
“You think so too, Regis?”

Regis just finished saying that when a half naked man walked over from another open air workshop.

It was the chief blacksmith Thomas. A man in his forties, he worked under Jerome back when the general was still in the capital. He was someone who would even lash out at a knight if the weapon handed to him was in tatters.

“Oh, Sir Strategist!”

“Ah, S-Sorry, Mr Smith isn’t familiar with how things work in the army…”
“Mr Smith did great!”

“Eh?”

“Ara, without even looking at the original plans, it was impressive of him to reforge ‘Grand Tonnerre Quatre’! News that he made it even

better than the original spread, so everyone is here to ask for his help!”

“Hah…”

Regis gave a resigned reply.

The atmosphere wasn’t malicious. Or rather, it would be terrific if Enzo joined the army and worked seriously as a blacksmith.

Enzo shrugged indifferently.

“I am just working normally…”

“Not at all, I heard from the blacksmith guild in Rouen city that you were good, but you are better than I imagined!”

Enzo became more embarrassed by Thomas’ compliments.

Enzo’s disciple Lionel chipped in:

“Yes, there are many blacksmiths in Rouen city, but master is special. He didn’t receive any big projects as he is not good with words, but no one could smith metal as smoothly as him.”
“Be quiet.”

Enzo who looked as if he had bitten on a bitter bug tugged on Lionel’s sleeve.

Regis nodded.

“If it doesn’t trouble anyone, I have no reason to stop it.”

“It’s no trouble at all!”

Thomas held up a sword for Regis to see.

To be honest, Regis doesn’t use swords, so he couldn’t tell if the repairs were good or bad.

But the eyes of the chief blacksmith were sparkling.

“I can’t believe this is a standard issue sword from the army! Its blade is shining! It is just like a famed sword used by nobles!”

“I see…”
“Just by knocking and sharpening it a little, he could achieve such a standard, this is sorcery!”

The blacksmiths and the soldiers in line voiced out their agreement, “It’s true.” “Like magic.”

Enzo’s embarrassment increased.

“Ah, erm… hammering it straight if it is crooked, sharpening it if it is dull… Isn’t that normal?”

Lionel said with a wry smile.

“Normal people can’t straighten a sword with one strike of the hammer. They couldn’t sharpen perfectly either. Sharpening both sides of a metal equally is no easy task for most people.”
“You are really skilled at this.”

Thomas nodded in agreement.

“Next would be the high salaries. It would still take time to restore it to such a level, which isn’t something a blacksmith attached to the army should be doing… Please repair it roughly for the sake of speed, it will be easier that way too. Hey, would I be beaten up in my sleep if I say that?”

“I don’t think that way…”

“Thank you very much! If possible, can your disciple start working too?”

“Well, I am not hiding him, so it’s fine.”

Enzo took the sword from the next soldiers in line and inspected it.

“... Hmm… seems like your sword hits are slanted. Does it feel a bit off when you hold the hilt?”

The soldier scratched his head, and his comrades laughed out loud.

Enzo untied the leather from the grip.

“As expected, the hilt is crooked, I will hammer it straight then.”

He removed the hilt from the blade, placed it in the furnace, then started hammering it on the anvil. He straightened it just like that, handed it to his disciple and said:

“Fix the hilt.”
“Yes, master!”

Enzo took the pike from the next soldier, commented that ‘this just needs sharpening’ and grinded it with a file. The blade on the pike regained its glimmer in no time.

There weren’t any flashy movements, just quick and accurate repair work.

The blacksmiths around him showed an expression of admiration, including Thomas.

“Amazing! Just like magic! As expected of Sir Strategist Regis’ brother-in-law!”

“Eh!? It has nothing to do with me!”

Regis didn’t expect to hear his name, and shook his head frantically.

However, rumours tend to go in the direction that was the most interesting.

The strategist was a wizard, so his brother-in-law is one too ——
And so, a new legend was born.

8th June, morning ——

The day after the march began.

A large tent was erected at the center of the encampment.

There was a very long table in the center of the tent, with lots of chairs placed on the side.

The commander Altina was seated all the way in.

On her right was Regis’ seat.

To her left was Brigadier General Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt, leader of the Black Knights.

On the opposite side of Altina was Lieutenant General Benjamin Emmanuel Beaumarchais, his brother Jansen Gabriel was seated beside him.

Clarisse stood at the corner of the tent. When outsiders were present, she wouldn't move, smile or talk, just like a doll.

Regis laid out a map on the table.

"We will leave the defences of the west to the local noble army. We have two captured Princess class battleship that we seized from the High Britannians in the sea, crewed by sailors who surrendered and are familiar with the controls. It could be operated smoothly, so they won't lose so easily. Also ——"

Regis opened a letter.

"—— News from Bertram. The contraption in Princess Class vessel number one is damaged, and had been sent to the docks. Engineers will be despatched to pull it apart for analysis. Belgaria will definitely be able to build similar battleships in the future."

"How long would that take?"

Jerome asked. Regis took out another letter.

"The engineers estimated that the works including crafting the mold for the all the parts and creating the replica would take about two years."

"So in the meantime, the two battleships would be their only defences. How bold."

"They will prioritize the production of the cannons. If they are fast, there will be Empire-made Elswick cannons next month.

"Hmm… We want to try it too, so prepare some for us."

"Understood, I will prepare it."

Jerome was a man who wanted to keep getting stronger, that's why

he was willing to negotiate. He was already plenty strong, but he still wanted to be more powerful.

The mechanics of the steam engine was more complicated, so it was hard to reproduce them, but the structure of the cannons were much easier. They had already started production. If the range of the cannons could match their adversary, they wouldn't be attacked one-sidedly by the High Britannian battleships.

If High Britannia commited more battleships to the war effort immediately, they would have to fight another tough battle…

They learnt from the captives that the enemy's naval strategy was rather pessimistic.

Forced by the orders of the new queen Margaret Steelart and the strategist Oswald Coulthard, they took a cautious approach.

—— Judging from the testimony of the captives, the possibility that they wouldn't fight if they lose was very high.

Anyway, Margaret and Oswald who directed this war appeared to be outside their home country.

The possibility that the High Britannia Navy would abandon their national defence and commit a large number of warships into the war was slim.

"By the way, if the words of the captives could be trusted, Margaret, the new queen of High Britannia took part in their expedition force. But I never heard any news of her being skilled in martial arts…"

This was hard to fathom, the Belgarian Empire was a nation with the strongest army in the continent after all. Wouldn't it be dangerous for the queen to join the expedition?

Was it confidence in their new rifles and cannons, trust in the commander Oswald, or was she just an optimist?

Regis saw her once before, she was riding in a black carriage. She didn't look like she was proficient in swordsmanship or horsemanship.

He had never spoken to her before, and she was a newly coronated queen, so information about her was severely lacking. Regis couldn't work out the true intentions of the new queen.

Jerome sneered.

"Hah! That damn queen is —— a big moron!"

Normally, saying such audacious things about a national leader would offend others.

If they could capture her, they would be able to ask for a queen's ransom.

If they don't pay the money, the entire country would be branded 'valuing money over their lord'.

"If it is up to me, I would take the queen away from the army, then make a detour around the battlefield before sending her home… But what would Colonel Oswald Coulthard do?"

"Hah! If they do that, they shouldn't have let her follow along in the beginning!"

"Ah, true…"

Regis turned towards Altina and Jerome did the same.

Altina pouted.

"What? Am I that witless!?"

"There isn't much difference compared to you assaulting the invulnerable fortress."

Regis shrugged.

Altina wanted to refute him, but could only grit her teeth as she couldn't think of anything to say.

"You you you…"

But such reckless action was a thing of the past.

Altina learned a lot of things recently too, and could finally stay in the

headquarters calmly. Now, she wouldn't charge towards the frontline like she used to.

She had really grown.

Well then —— Regis suddenly changed the topic.

"According to the diagnosis of the lady doctor, the red wrist fracture of the former Balzac duke will take three months to heal."

"Because Eddie and Auguste escaped from the capital, Auguste can't stay in the capital anymore right?"

"... He didn't have a choice and is embroiled in this political struggle. Let him stay with the unit until his wounds heal."

"When we return to Fort Volks, Eddie would be there too!"

Altina said loudly and Regis nodded.

Then —— the next item.

"How should we deal with the Mercenary King?"

Altina showed a troubled face while Jerome turned silent with his arms crossed.

Benjamin said firmly:

"We hang him of course."

"No!"

Altina slammed the table and stood up, which made Benjamin open his eyes wide.

"Why not? This is the tradition for the Empire. If he surrendered without a fight, we could still treat him with the same level of respect as a retainer. But once a battle breaks out, even if the commander surrenders early, they must be executed."

"Because, it would be a waste!"

"The lowly Mercenary King?!"

“Be it mercenary or royals, the strong are the strong. He will be a reliable force if he becomes our ally.”

“What!? Ally!? Please don’t joke about this, Princess!”

Not just him, even Jansen besides him was speechless. It seemed that Altina’s opinion was beyond common sense for the empire.
Fufufu, Jerome laughed with his shoulders shivering.

“That man is strong indeed. Much stronger than the scum knights in the capital.”

“But the character of a person is important for the Imperial Army! Taking in an opponent that should be executed just because he is strong… I object!”

“Haha! You are even lower than him.”

“I-Is that Mercenary King ranked higher compared to me!?”

Benjamin’s face was red from rage.

Hmmp, Jerome sneered.

“Of course. You think you can dodge my lance? Your peerage might protect you in the courts, but a commoner is the same as a Marquis on the battlefield.”

“Insolent! A mere Margrave dare mock me!?”

“That’s exactly it. That’s how weak you are, using your peerage to threaten others if something even slightly irks you.”

“Being humiliated before the Princess… I won’t stand for this…!!”

“You picked the wrong opponent if you want to throw temper that doesn’t match your ability. It will be too late to regret it when your head rolls.”

“Curses! Curses!”

Benjamin’s veins were visible, as if they were on the verge of exploding.

Regis sighed.

They had put aside their difference so far before a common powerful adversary, but it was an uneasy truce. Benjamin was a grand noble who grew up in the courts, and it was only natural that he wouldn't respect someone with lower rank and peerage than him.

However, Jerome detested arrogant nobles who were mediocre in terms of ability.

They were incompatible like water and fire.

—— If this was a story, the two of them would be able to resolve their difference amiably by resolving one problem.

In Jerome's eyes, there were only 'those who can be used' and 'those that can't be used'.

On the other hand, Benjamin was heavily influenced by the values of the courts. The Second Army was also stationed in the capital for a long time.

The first army to engage the High Britannian forces was the Second Army, which was a coincidence. They were deployed here because of political reasons during the Founding day festival, they wouldn't be in the west otherwise.
Originally, the Second Army was a unit that defended the capital together with the First Army, and lacked battle experience.

Benjamin inherited his father's peerage and rank, he himself had no accomplishment or battle experience to speak of. His biggest merit would be not making any major mistakes during his youth.

Compared to the martial skills of Jerome and the Mercenary king… His honour as a knight was just a vanity.

Most nobles who spend a lot of time in courts had such a temper. It was the same for the noble army Regis served in before.

They get emotional easily.

Born in a wealthy family and growing up without worries, they would become wilful, arrogant and conceited, as if they were the rulers of

the world.
Even if they gain knowledge and learn the etiquette of the courts, it was difficult for them to nurture their character to know self restraint.

When they get emotional, they would be as stubborn as a child.

—— However, it would be troublesome if this developed into a duel.

The Fourth Army was a mixed unit. The old guards from the Beilschmidt Border Regiment and the soldiers from the former Second Army already had some friction.

They could only wait for Benjamin to cool down and consider the consequences carefully. After that, Regis could stir the matter in a peaceful direction in a way that wouldn't hurt his dignity.

As he was considering all that, Altina leaned forward.

"Sir Benjamin, are you confident enough to defeat Jerome?"

"Your Highness…!?"

When he saw Altina's serious expression, Benjamin's face turned white.

Regis grabbed his head.

—— Isn't that adding fuel to the fire!?

Altina was probably just curious.

"If you can defeat him, that would be a great accomplishment right? I fought Jerome in a close quarter duel in the past, but if he rode a horse and used his lance, I think he would be a match for the Mercenary King and Latreille."

"Then, compared to His Highness… Could it be…"

"Latreille was careless when the Mercenary King Gilbert ambushed him. The Mercenary King is on par with Jerome. I fought all three of them before. Latreille is stronger with a sword, Gilbert is better with polearms. Jerome is the best in fighting on horseback. Sir Benjamin, which field do you excel in?"

“Ugghhh…!”

Latreille was famous for his swordsmanship. Regis saw him forcing Altina to a corner. Although Latreille did manipulate her emotions to fight in a cramped place.
But no matter what, he was a strong fighter renowned throughout the continent.

Benjamin came from a martial family too and practiced with weapons a lot in his youth, but his opponent was too strong. Realizing this problem, sweat appeared on his forehead.

Regis coughed.

“Ahem… Erm, everyone here are allies on the same team. The whereabouts of the High Britannians are still unknown. Instead of competing in personal matches, please help to divide the workload on hand.”

“Yes, right! The strategist has a point! Now is not the time for the Empire to turn on each other!”

Benjamin said as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Hmmp…”

Seeing that his opponent had lost the will to fight, Jerome crossed his arms and leaned back on his chair.

Altina finally realized that Benjamin was just showing a false front, and made a regretful expression.

“Anyway, I will negotiate with Gilbert about this. The more powerful allies we have, the better it is.”

“That’s true…”

Regis nodded, and concluded that there wouldn’t be a fight today.

Of course, there was no telling what would happen in the future. After all, the invasion of the High Britannian Army was an unexpected incident, and all the losses suffered by the Empire so far were unexpected.

It was true the more powerful allies they have, the better.

But they would still need to fit it within their budget.

Altina didn't have a territory of her own. Her mother who would normally provide backing for her was a commoner, her assets was just a house in Sanc Joel city that was beside the capital.

The budget for the Fourth Army was similar to the Beilschmidt Border Regiment.

For an army of this scale, the War Department would provide the budget for about 13000 men.

But if they include the hiring fee for the strongest Mercenary in the continent, they couldn't raise the money even if they sell everything, including the ashes in the stoves.

—— Unlike subordinates who fight for their lord, how should they deal with the Mercenary King who fights for money?
"Oh right, the sister of the Mercenary King, Franziska, and the 'Sorcerer' Jessica are nowhere to be found, they are probably on the run."

Altina's face turned serious.

In a night battle in the past, Franziska who uses a crossbow damaged 'Grand Tonnerre Quatre'. The bodyguard Eric was also injured by an arrow.

"... I see… So they are still alive…"
"They might come back to break their brother out."

"I really envy such familial bonds. Looks like we have to strengthen security tonight."

"Yes, let's increase the patrols."

Last would be reporting the internal affairs of the Fourth Army. In short, they were short on men and funds.

It was decided that the problem would be adjourned until they head back to the capital.

After finishing the War Council, Altina stood up in high spirits.

“Alright, let’s go!”

“… Erm… Go where? The unit is about to set off.”

“Didn’t I already say that. I will be negotiating with Gilbert, and make him work for me!”

“Eh!? Your Highness, do you have to do this personally!?”

“This is not a question of whether I need to. I am doing it because I want to.”

The captives’ hands were tied to their head.

About 1500 High Britannian soldiers were taken prisoners, 3000 of them were killed in battle, and the rest fled. A lot of them escaped in the thick fog.

An estimated 5000 soldiers ran away, so the Empire had to be ready to pursue the remnants of the enemy.

Three hundred mercenary of ‘Renard Pendu’ assaulted the 5000 men strong Empire headquarters.

150 of them died, 150 of them were captured. They might be unarmed, but no efforts were spared in guarding them. They were given extra heavy shackles and have three times the guards on watch.

On top of that, Gilbert was isolated and tied up in another place. If they execute the leader of the captives, it would fan their emotions.

Jerome said he wasn’t interested in negotiations and returned to his Knight Corps.

Benjamin didn’t come along. For grand nobles, it would be a humiliation to talk to imprisoned mercenaries. Normally, the nobles would only talk to prisoners who were nobles themselves.

Clarisse returned to attend to her chores too.

And so, only Regis and Altina went to the place where Gilbert was

held.

“… Altina, it is fine to meet him… But he is a mercenary. It would be meaningless if the point of the negotiation is not about the remuneration.”

When no one was around, Regis would speak in a normal tone.

There wouldn’t be any major battles, so he could smile naturally again. Altina didn’t stand on ceremony either.

“I know, but if he doesn't become my subordinate, he would be executed right?”

“… There’s no other choice. We can’t set such a dangerous fellow free.”

“Wouldn’t that be strange for a negotiation? I don’t want the negotiation to become like that. I really want him to work for me.”

“Hmm… Let’s think about this possibility then.”

It was hard to gain their loyalty.
When they reached the tent where the prisoners were held, the guards on duty knelt frantically when they saw Altina.

“P-Princess!? What brings you here!?”

It was expected for the soldiers to be stunned. There has never been a precedence of royals seeing a prisoner. Even if the prisoner was the famed Mercenary King.

But Altina didn’t seem to care.
“Thank you for your hard work. I want to talk to Gilbert, let me in.”

“B-But… He is the Mercenary King…”

“What? Can’t a royal meet a mercenary?”

“Ah, no! This way please.”
“Alright. I’m coming in.”

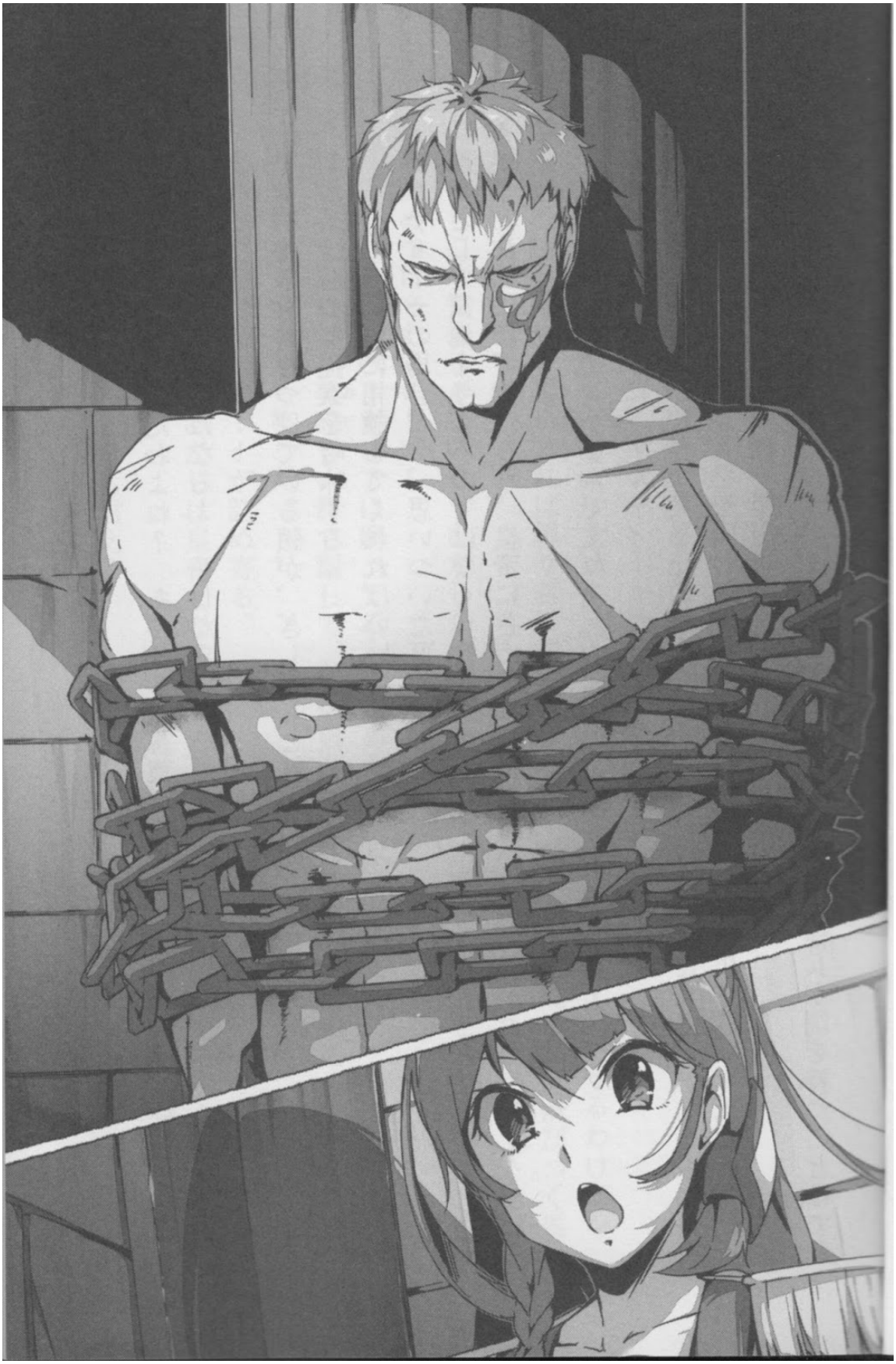
She pulled the curtain at the entrance.

And went in.

It was dark. They had only taken in the prisoners for just a few days, but the place reeked of wild animals.

The Mercenary King was tied to a tall pillar.

Several chains were wrapped around his body, as if he was a beast. Because his wounds from the battle weren't taken care of, the chains were dyed black from his wound's blood.



His sharp eyes looked their way.

Regis shuddered. Had he been alone, he would have run away already.

Altina put her hands on her waist and puffed her chest out.

“You looked lively, Gilbert!”

“……”

“I will make it simple. How about becoming my subordinate?”
His eyes closed.

His lips that were cut by knives opened.

“Kill me.”
“Hmm? That’s unexpectedly straightforward.”

“Imprisoned mercenary… will be hanged… I know at least that much.”

He didn’t seem eager to negotiate.

Regis suggested:
“... Her Highness admires your martial prowess. How about joining the Imperial Army? We will pay you handsomely, and will guarantee the safety of your subordinates.”

At this moment, Gilbert’s stone like expression softened.

“I heard the strategist Regis d’Auric is a dangerous man. Known as the Wizard… For you, I am probably a monster huh.”

“Eh!?”

Altina furrowed her brows.

“That’s right, Regis. You are turning it into a hostage negotiation, what are you thinking?”

“Your Highness!? It is a proper right to propose a ransom for prisoners. Or do so in an equivalent manner, conscription is also…”

“If that is so, then they won’t be true allies, right?”
“No no…”

It is impossible for people who fought to the death with us just four days ago to acknowledge us as comrades, Regis thought.

However, Altina seemed to be serious.

“Gilbert, you said that your country is the Mercenary band right?”
“... What about it?”

“You said you will protect them right? If that’s not a lie, I can help you. I will become Empress! I will then acknowledge your country.”

“What…”

The chains that bounded Gilbert clinked.

Regis considered the feasibility of this proposal hurriedly.
—— At least discuss this with me beforehand.

If it was Altina, this proposal was possible.

Not bestowing territory, but recognizing the Mercenary band as a nation? Is it possible? It is impossible from a legal standpoint. However, it would be possible if she was the Empress. A similar arrangement was made in the past too.

“... Like Bargainheim?”

Regis muttered, and Altina nodded.

“Yes, I thought of the method Regis used before. If I become Empress, I can recognize Diethart’s Bargainheim as a nation of similar standings with the Empire. In that case, Gilbert’s country can be recognized too.”

That was the greatest reward. No matter how much money the mercenaries saved, they couldn’t simply become a nation.

But Gilbert shook his head.

“... Stop your lies. There is no way a royal of Belgaria will honor a promise with a mercenary. And I don’t know that Diethart person anyway.”

“He is a barbarian.”

“Hah!? Enough with your deceit! It’s impossible for you Belgarians to keep your promises with barbarians! You are people who will hang your prisoners, be they barbarians or mercenary! You think I am an idiot that will be tempted so easily!?”

“You are the one being rude! Me not keeping my promise? Why are you so sure about that!?”

“… I know about the corruption in Belgaria very well… I can tell. The one who will be Emperor is the Second Prince. Since that is a fact, I will be a laughing stock if I still take the bait you laid out for me.”

Gilbert said with a hearty laugh.

Altina closed in on him.

“Stop kidding me! I am the one who will be Empress! I will overcome any obstacles there is to change the Empire!”

“Talk is cheap.”

“Hmmp —— You are unexpectedly timid. I was hoping you will say ‘if you don’t keep your promise, I will cut your head off.’”

“What…!?”

Gilbert opened his eyes wide in shock.

“I won’t give great wealth or territory. What I can give you is the ‘promise’ you distrust so much. I will acknowledge your country when I become Empress. Since you are betting your life for your course, then have the resolve to die for it. If you think I didn’t fulfil the promise, then come take my head.”

“Princess, are you serious…?”

“What do you think? But, I detest lies.”

Altina placed her hands on her hips.

Gilbert fell silent. The light of intelligence shone in his beast like eyes. He seemed to be considering this proposal seriously.

“… Can you release my subordinates?”

Regis answered this question.

“If you accept and work for us, then announce it to your subordinates. If there are anyone willing to follow you, we will hire them. We will let those who are unwilling, to leave. And of course, we will tend to their wounds before that.”

“If I disagree, you will hang us all?”

“... If we were the one who lost, will you release us without compensation?”

“We will definitely demand ransom.”

“Sigh, that’s how it is. Naturally, no one will pay the ransom for barbarians and mercenary, so they will all be hung. However, the service of ‘Renard Pendu’ would be equivalent to a tidy sum you can pay in place of a ransom.”

“... It seems that… I can only bet on you guys keeping your promise.”

Gilbert glared.

His gaze was really pressurizing. If it was Regis in the past, he might have bent his back and not look anymore. But he was staring right back this time.

The feral aura dissipated. Gilbert seemed to have acknowledged Altina and Regis’ character.

They probably convinced him.

It was suddenly noisy outside the tent.

Someone called.

“Reporting! A message from the Empire! It’s urgent!”

A voice that was patched from screaming. His look of urgency made Regis gulp.

Altina’s expression turned serious.

“Enter!”

A lightly armoured soldier barged into the tent and knelt on one knee.

“Pardon my intrusion! It’s a grave matter, please forgive ——”

Regis met this soldier before. He was one of the scouts sent to report the news to the capital. From his ragged breathing, it was easy to imagine something drastic happened.

Altina nodded.

“Say it.”

“—— On the morning of the 6th, His Majesty, the Emperor passed away!”

“What!?”

Altina almost stopped breathing.

The entire army was shaken too.

He reported an even more impactful news.

“ —— The Second Prince Latreille is preparing to succeed the throne!”

“He actually…!!”

Her ruby eyes turned in the direction of the Empire.

The news shook up Regis too, it was like taking a club to the head.

Haha! Gilbert laughed.

“Hahaha! What will you do now, Princess!? You were just talking about becoming the Empress! As expected, the Second Prince took the throne!”

“……”

“Your competitor took the throne, so you lost the right to be Empress right? Acknowledging my nation is just a dream now… Hahaha… Fate is cruel, I can only laugh.”

Damn it, Altina clenched her fist.

Gilbert smirked.

“Is this luck or strategy… The Second Prince is one step faster than you… You might have won the war, but lost the political battle… No matter how noble your ideal is, you can’t accomplish anything now.”

His mocking words had a hint of disappointment. He could see that his dream of founding his own country was just a mirage in the desert.

Altina glared with her crimson eyes that were like burning flame.

“I won’t give up!”

“What?”

“In the beginning, I was alone… My only companion was my maid. After that, I got the aid of Regis’ wisdom, the loyalty of the soldiers in the Border Regiment, took down Fort Volks and finally mustered a large army. Even if Latreille becomes Emperor, I will strive on to change this country! I won’t stop before I draw my last breath! I won’t permit foolish words like ‘kill me’!”

“... Strive on? Not giving up? What audacious words. But the fact remains, what can you do? Start a civil war? Ahh, that would be to my liking. But are your troops willing to follow you into a hopeless battle doomed to failure?”

Gilbert was right.

The Belgaria Empire just finished a war with High Britannia and all the citizens were tired of fighting. If she started a civil war now, a lot of soldiers would probably revolt.
And half of the Fourth Army was from the Second Army. The commander Benjamin was from the Second Prince faction.

If she raised the flag of revolution, the Army will crumble immediately.

Hence, Regis judged that there was no point in negotiating.

He sighed.

“... First, we should confirm this. There will be a huge change in the situation from now on, do you wish to be hanged no matter what?”

“Hmmp…”
“If you are willing to do manual labours, we can take your shackles off, and not execute you immediately. But as a condition, you have to keep your men in line.”

“You will kill my men if I reject right? It would be forced labour, and those who can’t move would be killed off right?”

“... You still have some sway over your men. I only proposed this because of your leadership skills. If you perform manual labour, the mercenaries in ‘Renard Pendu’ would be less dangerous too.”

Without Gilbert to rein them in, it would be difficult to force those mercenaries to work.

He rubbed the shackles restraining them.

“Hmm… You think I still hold sway over them after my loss? Well, fine. I am not some rotten person who wishes for his men to be hanged.”

“Very well. You will perform manual labour in the meantime then.”

It would be difficult to continue the recruitment talks under such circumstances. Before they could harness his strength, they had to consider their own situation and direction they should take.

Unlike Gilbert’s tough reply, Altina stood stiffly like a person who lost her light in the night.

Regis turned to the entrance.

“... Your Highness, let’s go back.”
“Ehh, okay.”

She was putting on a strong front, but her heart was probably like roses that had fallen because of a storm.

Altina returned to the tent she was working in.

The documents he used in the conference earlier were scattered all over the table.

They left to find Gilbert immediately after the meeting, so Regis didn't tidy his documents yet.

Altina didn't sit down, placing both her palms on the table to support her body weight.

"Summon Jerome and the others, we need to discuss our plans for the future."

Regis didn't sit either. He wanted to let her calm down as much as possible, so he said slowly.

"… You have decided the way forward?"

"My heart is still unchanged!"

The usual lively Altina looked very stressed and anxious.

She was deeply affected by this.

That was only natural.

She was suppressed since she was young, and had finally found the path she wanted to take one day, believing in it so much that she was ready to bet her life on it. But the door to her ideal goal was now closed.

It would probably take some time for her to cool down.

—— Should I have an idle chat with her first?

Regis said:

"Altina, you also said that you won't give up earlier right? That is not an approach, but something like your resolve. Even if you call everyone over, you can't issue a specific order right?"

"Specific?"

"Who, when, how, what… Deciding all this and issuing commands are your responsibilities. If you want to hear their opinions in order to

make a judgement, I can gather them. But if you are just anxious and confused, it won't do."

"Ah… Yeah… That's right."

Altina finally realized she allowed her anger to get to her head. She calmed herself down a little and relaxed her shoulders.

To break the stiff mood, Regis said in a bright tone.

"Sir Jerome is very petty too."

"Yes… That's true."

"He could decide what he wants quickly and reach an immediate conclusion. That's why he think others are slow."
"Indeed, I seldom see Jerome being troubled."

"If you are clear of your goals, there is less chance of being troubled by outside influence. What kind of preparation was needed to accomplish one's objective? What should be thrown away? What should be done, and what to avoid?"

"Jerome's goal?"

"… He isn't dissatisfied by the system of the country, he is just unhappy about the nobles who exiled him. If the nobles are gone, he would want to return to the capital."

"Ahh, I see."

"He not only considered his 'goals', he also thought about his 'means'… Even his loss to you in a duel was one of them."

Altina looked surprised.

Now that he thought about it, Regis had not told her yet.

"What is his idea?"

"Sir Jerome's plan was —— to keep increasing his forces' power to the First Army's level, then the grand nobles won't be able to expel him easily, or stop him from returning to the capital."

Regis didn't need to ask Jerome, and could tell from the budgets.

Jerome's goal was to return to the capital, his means was to increase his forces' power.

Although he was still passionate about equipment and training, Jerome probably lost that ambition.

If Altina becomes Empress, his goal would be achieved. He just needed to follow her for now. But it was hard to tell what he would do from now on.

"I see, so that was the reason he wanted Regis?"
Oh right, such a thing happened —— Regis recalled.

When Regis first arrived at Fort Sierck, he captured the bandits and Jerome asked Regis to serve under him.

Regis wasn't sure about his own worth…

"Well, he did say that he will even use dust if they are useful, and he increased his forces using that greed. Since we understood his goal and means, he will be able to gauge his own values and make quick decisions."

"I am also thinking about them a little too."

"… You are looking too far ahead, but that isn't a bad thing. Normal people can only see the path they are walking on. But you are thinking about the future, which is a good quality for a leader."

"However, that isn't enough right?"

"… Yes. If you want to look far ahead, you have to recognize your current situation and what you need to do. If you can only describe the blueprints of the future, it would be nothing more than a wish. If you want to make it a reality, you have to use your 'means' to pave the way, and see your goals clearly."
"I see…"

The Emperor had passed away, while her political enemy Latreille was making the preparations to succeed the throne.

In such circumstances, what goals should she set, and what should she do?

Altina frowned.

And said after much consideration.

“... I want… to end all wars in the Empire. After seeing the battles with High Britannia, I thought about it again. No matter how strong one’s army was, there would be a day your forces would fail. We must maintain good relations with neighbouring countries and work together with them.”

“Yes.”

She finally calmed down.

Normally, it wouldn’t be a surprise if she gave up. That was how despairing the situation was.

But Altina had a brave and upbeat character, and would never back down.

That’s the part Regis likes about her.

It seemed that she had managed to turn her ‘wish’ into her ‘goal’.

But the means of ‘inheriting the throne’ was probably impossible.

Regis sorted out his mind and said:

“... The Belgaria Empire is already exhausted. The damage from the war with High Britannia made it even worse, and the harsh conditions are going to become worse. Putting the small skirmish of the Emperor from two generations ago aside, the previous Emperor Vicente prioritized the arts over military prowess, resulting in military strategic failures… Emperor Liam liked grandiose victories and enacted militaristic policies… and the citizens were laden with heavy taxes while the young were conscripted. The war maps might paint a pretty picture, but the lives of the citizens are filled with suffering.”
The militia Ducasse from the Seventh Army mentioned his goal was just to protect his village and family.

If he died in the battle earlier, who will take care of the farm in his village then.

What about his wife and kids? It takes a lot of strength to plow the fields. Even if the farm was intact, they couldn't collect enough food if no one tended to the crops.

Altina nodded with a serious face.

"There are villages that couldn't pay the taxes."

"... There will definitely be taxes if they have farm land. But there won't be any returns if they don't put in the manual work. Not just conscription, they are also affected by plagues and adverse weather… Naturally, they will be punished if they can't afford the taxes. There are many who ran away out of fear of taxes."

"Abandoning their farm?"

"... The farm is only meaningful if they can live off it. If they can't plow the fields but have to pay the taxes, it was only natural for them to abandon it."

"Since the root cause is identified, can't they just lower the taxes?"

"There is a system where the tax rate is lowered if the militia falls in battle, but it is not perfect. If the tax rates are too low, there would be more tax evaders too. The citizens are not saints either."

"Ah… That's true."

"And if we don't collect taxes, it would be hard to strengthen the nation's military which would lead to the Empire's downfall."
"But we can't impose heavy taxes just for the sake of national defense."

"... It is unreasonable for the nobles to impose heavy taxes on the people in their domain. But if you asked them why they did so, the answer would be something like 'because we are higher mortals'."

Wrong, Regis shook his head.

They were going off topic, they had to leave things like freedom and

equality aside for now.

Altina nodded slightly.
“Then what should we do? My goal is to end wars, stop the oppression of the nobles, make the citizens happy and change the Empire. However, other than becoming the empress, there is no other way of achieving this.”

She was right. Being Empress was the only way to achieve her goal.

But that chance was very slim.

No matter what the situation was, collecting as much intelligence as possible was necessary, but to think the Emperor passed away.
In that case, Latreille who was the next in line would naturally succeed the throne.

“It would be great if Prince Latreille thinks the same way as you…”

“That fellow actually said that ‘war is necessary’!”

“... That was before the war with High Britannia. The powerful knight corps that is the backbone of the Empire’s military might is powerless before the new type of rifles. He should understand this.”

If there is war, we must win —— This was the foundation of Latreille’s policies.

A veteran knight losing to the bullets fired by a militia, this forces the Empire to alter the way they fought, and a change in government policies was necessary.

Altina tilted her head.

“You think that guy will change his mind?”

“I am not sure what kind of conclusion he will reach, but he would be a fool if he didn’t.”

“Latreille might be detestable, but he is not a fool.”

“It is the same for his policies, punishing the extravagance of the nobles and building up the national reserves. We are on the same page on this point.”

“Well, that’s true… He might be detestable, but he is doing his best for the Empire. But I will definitely reject being his spouse!”

She puffed her cheeks.

Regis smiled wryly.

He didn’t know why she objects to it so much, but their long term plans were set.
“... In the past, Prince Latreille considered war to be a main product of the Empire. However, it will be the era of guns and cannons in the future, and the very nature of war will change. Compared to the things we can gain, the things we will lose would be greater, a trend that has been consistent since ancient times.”

“We must avoid this!”

“Ahhh, I won’t give in on shrinking the frontlines. If you can agree with him on this point, then there would be no reason to fight with Prince Latreille anymore.”

“... That’s true… When will Latreille become emperor?”
She was slightly worried.

“No matter what, it will be impossible to succeed the throne before the state funeral. But since he already announced that he would succeed the throne, it’s very likely that he will make arrangement for the state funeral.”

The High Britannian Army was still in the Empire’s territory right now.

In order to avoid the absence of an emperor during times of war, it was normal to announce the succession early.
And Latreille was the first in the line of succession, so there wasn’t any problem with tradition. As the commander-in-chief who repelled the High Britannian invasion, his popularity among the people was high.

He lost the support of some nobles in the Founding Day celebration in April, but everyone will follow him if he becomes emperor.

The emperor wasn’t a leader elected by the nobles and commoners

democratically, but a position only those with the right to inherit and absolute power could lay claim on.

Maybe he had already taken the throne —— Regis couldn't say that possibility out loud.

But it was still a possibility.

Regis shook his head.

"... Our intelligence is too lacking. We should wait for more information on what Prince Latreille is doing."

"Yes…"

"Altina?"

She lowered her head.

Gritted her teeth.

And rubbed her eyes.

"But… I… won't… give up… but… even so…"

"……"

Regis couldn't say anything.

Her shoulders were trembling.

She clenched her fists.

Squeezing out her voice, she muttered:
"... I… Still can't do it."

What should he do.

There wasn't any book that detailed a scene like this.

Regis could only stand where he was, and watch Altina holding back her tears.

He already steeled himself for the possibility of such a day coming.

His knowledge wouldn't be of any help. In such an impossible

situation, it was meaningless no matter what he did. That's what he was thinking about.

He already understood, but his heart still ached deeply.

They failed.

He failed.

He knew the road would be tough, but when the cold hard truth was shoved right in his face, the sense of reality welled up and he felt the pain of falling into a chasm.

A stab of pain struck deep inside his nose.

His plan was to shine the way for Altina, and guide her forward.

But that door had been closed mercilessly.

There was nothing they could do.
He couldn't create an advantageous situation when he negotiated with Latreille.

He didn't propose a more aggressive plan for Altina to become Empress.

—— Too passive.

They shouldn't be satisfied with being second in line to the throne.

But there weren't any schemes to chase Latreille out of the picture.

Even though he promised Altina that he would help her take the throne.

What kind of strategist was he, he couldn't come up with anything.

He could only wait for the inevitable.
Considered the age of the reigning emperor, he shouldn't have dallied in laying out his plans!

Why couldn't he do anything!?

Because he wasn't confident.

That's why he was reacting to the situation passively, instead of taking the initiative to lay out his schemes. He was just solving the problems as they come.

However, just being second in line was a huge problem.

He was also fretful of the idea of 'getting rid of Latreille'.
His failure this time was because he was timid, neglectful and lacked awareness.

Regis clutched his uniform at the chest.

"... I am sorry."
He uttered in a trembling voice.

Her head remained lowered.

"Is there no other way?"
"... Those with succession rights will lose it when the new emperor takes the throne. This is the custom to avoid civil unrest."

The law doesn't apply on royals.

In this country, royals were an existence not bounded by the law.

The question of succession rights had always been decided through traditional laws.

That's why it was difficult to overturn.

If Latreille took the throne, Altina will lose her succession rights.

Even if Latreille dies after that, Altina will not inherit the throne.

She clenched her fist tightly.

"Even so!"

She banged it loudly against the table.

"—— I won't give up on my will to change this country!"
"Altina…"

"This is my goal. Becoming the Empress is the means. Correct?"

“… Ahh.”

Amazing, Regis thought.
He remembered her conversation with Gilbert.

“In the beginning, I was alone… My only companion was my maid.”

When he first met her, the only thing she had was the sword she was gripping tightly.

A commander in name, a girl without any authority.

But she challenged the hero Jerome, drew out the intellect of the timid Regis, accomplished seemingly ridiculous schemes and established the faction she had right now.

The one and only door might be shut.

But there wasn’t any time to sigh before that door.

Altina had more or less moved on.

So Regis had to strive ahead too.

And find a new path.

And this time, he definitely couldn’t fail.

Regis swore.
“… I… My cowardice is the main cause of failure, more so than my lack of ability. No matter how incompetent I am, if I don’t take action because of my fear of failure, that would be the same as going against my promise of helping you. No matter what, I will do all I can to come up with plans, I won’t hesitate anymore. Even if I lack confidence —— but I will start now.”

Altina shook her head.

“Not ‘will start now’. We lost to Latreille. We have to think what we are lacking. No matter how harsh the condition… or the defeat we face, or the pain we might suffer! It’s ‘start right now’! We have to do our best and work towards our goal! I don’t know… and don’t want to know a different way of living my life!”

Her dark crimson eyes shone brightly.

Not ‘will start now’.

But always thinking about moving forward, ‘starting right now’.

Even if she was alone, even if she loses her weapon, even if she couldn’t rely on the help of someone else’s wisdom, she will continue to brave ahead.

Just keeping the necessary things in mind and stride forward.

Her wish will become the beacon that guides her down the right path —— Regis thought.

“Altina… will you still trust me?”

“Of course! Although I can’t be the empress anymore, but I still want to change this country. I don’t want to be Latreille’s subordinate either! Regis I will be in your care from now on too!”

She reached out her right hand.

Regis held it tight.

“… Thank you. I won’t let you down again.”
“I always believe… my strategist is the best.”

Altina’s eyes were misty. But she was still smiling.

He won’t let her down again.

Something frozen in Regis’ heart started moving again.

Regis and Altina sat down and started discussing their plans from now on.
“… It might be a bother, but we should find out more information about Prince Latreille. I already said it, from his political viewpoint, working with him will bring us much closer to our goal.”
“That’s true, then let’s meet him!”

“No, it’s not that simple. If he is still thinking about expanding territory, that would be troubling.”

“It’s much easier to duel with swords.”

“Altina… you want to fight in the balcony at night again?”

“Hmmm… I won’t do that, I’m not a kid anymore. Fighting in a cramped place is disadvantageous for me!”

“It’s the problem of terrain advantages!?”

Ahaha, Altina laughed.

“Just kidding.”

“Well, I feel that you know that too.”
“Actually on closer thought —— whenever I meet Latreille, he will always ask how I am doing first. That’s the way he is.”

“Since you know his political strategy, we should keep some distance from him first. The moment he becomes emperor, you will have to bow down before him. It might be understandable, but I find it hard to agree with, so we should avoid places where the difference in status will be made obvious.”

“That’s right, I don’t want to address him as emperor!”

Altina puffed her cheeks again.

Regis smiled wryly.

“… You hate Latreille because of his policies? Or something happened when you were young?”

“I don’t hate him totally. He is still my brother. But I hate the way he lies. He is always asking me how I am doing and makes such

insincere greetings!”

“... In that case, do you hate me too?”

“Regis might trick others, but you don’t lie?”

“Huh? Is that so?”

He had no idea that was the impression he gave others.

Anyway, he should send someone he trusted to the capital to collect intelligence.

That night ——

They received additional news.
Emperor Liam 15th did pass away.

According to the testimony of the guard commander, he seemed to have stopped breathing when he was sleeping in his chambers.

Next were matters about Latreille.
As Regis expected, Latreille announced that he would succeed the throne.

Although the High Britannian army was still within Belgaria’s sovereign territory, the citizens were still elated.

However, as the war had not concluded yet, the funeral of the emperor Liam the 15th was done in a simpler fashion.

A grand state funeral would be held in the future.

And so, Latreille’s coronation was postponed.

Even though Latreille announced that he would take the crown, he had yet to be coronated.

Or declare his future policies.

But the empire was slowly falling into Latreille’s hands.

Chapter 2 - Celestial River

On the 9th ——

Regis looked out the window.

The sun had risen to the top of the sky, and he could see the fort on the other side of the hill.

That was Fort Bonaire with its distinctive grey walls.

The tracks of hooves and carriages covered the green plains, and there were marks left by cannon fire everywhere. The signs of an intense battle could be seen easily.

But there were no bodies.

As it might lead to plague and disease, the horse carcasses and

corpses would be buried swiftly after battle at the first available opportunity.

Soldiers would carry quite a bit of money on their person. Apart from the need to purchase things in the army, the amount of money on them would affect their very lives if they needed to run.

Hence, a lot of soldiers would scavenge the corpse of enemy soldiers for valuables. That might be despicable, but only the lowest ranking soldiers would need to take care of the bodies, so it was a valuable chance for them to earn additional income to pad their meagre salary.

But that was limited to the bodies of the enemy.
The possessions of their fallen allies would be sent back.

Taking the possessions from fallen allies was more serious a crime then robbing the living, and was a big taboo religiously.

Fort Bonaire was just a half day's journey from the capital Versailles by foot and was the last line of defence for the the city.

However, the walls were already falling.

The gigantic gate of the fort was now a pile of rubble, as if a giant had smashed it with a hammer.
A large number of soldiers were clearing the debris by hand.

The fort was completed just recently, and the gate should have been made of very tough stones. It was hard to imagine that it had collapsed due to natural causes, but it wouldn't have been destroyed to such an extent even if it took several direct artillery hits.

—— So what happened?

The Fourth Army made uneasy noises after witnessing this scene, and their marching speed slowed down.

Altina rode her favorite horse Karakara. Seeing the commotion, she tilted her head in confusion.
"Did something happen?"
"… The damage is terrible."

Regis leaned out from the window of the carriage.

Altina came closer with her horse and asked,

“Hey, what do you think happened?”

“Hmm… I think it’s gunpowder, but how did they get such a large amount of it to the gate and detonate it? That’s the main concern here.”

“Latreille had it hard here too.”

“… Maybe it’s really lucky that Fort Bonaire didn’t fall.”

“Will it be fine for us to approach like this?”

“I have already dispatched scouts and contacted the other party. We can’t let our guard down, but I don’t think there is anything to fear.”

“Understood!”
Altina nodded and spurred Karakara to the head of the formation.

After ordering the unit lagging behind to catch up, she reached Fort Bonaire.

The soldiers at the gate gathered stones into baskets, carrying them somewhere far away to dispose of. At the sight of the Fourth Army, the soldiers greeted them by waving their hands.

Cheers erupted.

There were people waving flags too.

Lively army songs could be heard too.

The carriage Regis was riding in also entered Fort Bonaire. He turned to Clarisse, who was right next to him.

“Please wait in the carriage for a moment.”
“Understand, please be careful.”

She spoke in a gentle voice as she bid farewell to Regis.

After disembarking, Regis walked towards Altina.

She had already met with the commander of the fort.

He was a young knight.

“Your Highness, it is an honour to meet you!”
“Well, if it isn’t Coignieres. You seem lively.”

Altina smiled back.

The Seventh Army were the ones clearing the debris, with Coignieres as their leader.

He used to be stationed with the Beilschmidt Border Regiment in the past, but his attitude had changed completely, as if he was a different person.

His subordinates had stopped their work altogether, rejoicing in their reunion.

The cheers grew louder after Regis came near.

Coignieres saluted and said:

“Thank you for your hard work, Sir Regis!”

“Ehh? Ah, yes.”

Not expecting to receive such a gaze, Regis saluted in a hurry.
Coignieres was originally a Second Grade Combat Officer, but after taking on the role of commanding the Seventh Army when Lieutenant General Barguesonne was killed in action, he was most likely promoted. No matter what, Regis was certain his rank was subordinate to Coignieres’s.

The proper etiquette would be Regis saluting, and the other party returning the salute.

He could hear the soldiers of the Seventh Army cheering “Hooray for the Strategist Regis d’Auric!”

Regis was feeling light headed.
Just yesterday, he was filled with regret because of his failure in the succession struggles, it was a big contrast from the praises he was showered with today.

Regis stood stiffly in place ——

Suddenly, Altina smacked his back.
“What are you spacing out for? Give them a response!”

“Ehh!? Me!?”

“Is there another Strategist Regis d’Auric aside from you?”

“No… But… I, didn’t do much…”

“Regis, you are really…”
Altina shrugged as she smiled wryly.

Coignieres smiled too.

“You are still the same, Sir Strategist. Admiral Bertram’s report has already spread throughout the Empire.”

“... Report?”

“That’s right! Standing in for the wounded Admiral, the Strategist Regis d’Auric commanded the fleet and defeated the ‘Queen’s Navy’ of High Britannia, and even captured the enemy commander and the latest battleship!”

“... Erm, it’s thanks to the excellence of the Empire’s sailors, tactics that only appears in stories like diving into the sea at night was only possible because of their efforts.”

“Sinking the incredibly tough enemy battleship in a single explosion, is that true!?”

Coignieres had the face of a boy excited by a legend.

His subordinates asked excitedly.

Regis became frantic.

He couldn’t say that the report was a lie, and that did happen.
“... Yes… although our allied vessels were sunk too.”

“Ohhh! That is incredible!”

The cheers started spreading.

Regis had an inferiority complex, and would feel uneasy when he gets complimented. However, for soldiers who praise the accomplishments achieved in battle, it was impossible for them to understand this.

Coignieres used the chance and asked:

“I heard you used fantastical strategy to defeat the Mercenary King’s army of 10,000!”

“... The princess was the one who defeated the Mercenary King though?”

“You created fog! You can even do something like that!?”

“... Well, I did propose that… Ferdinand from the Pioneers took charge of execution, and it is thanks to all the ——”

Before Regis even finished, the Seventh Army grew rowdy again.

“He can create fog!?” “He is really a magician!” “Amazing!”

It was only natural for them to react like this.

Few people would study natural sciences in this era, and even if they understood the theory behind rainfall and the conditions for rainbows, they couldn’t use it to protect themselves in battle or hunt for game in the forest.

They couldn’t even grasp the idea that the fog was manmade.

And Regis used it in a real battle to neutralize the new model of rifles.

On top of that, the Seventh Army lost horribly to the High Britannia’s new model rifle in the battle of Lafressange recently.

Sounds of gasps became louder.

The more they praised him, the more uncomfortable Regis felt. He was not good with accepting compliments.

Regis changed the topic as if he was trying to escape from this situation.

“By the way… What happened to the gate, is this caused by a gunpowder explosion?”

“Ohh! You can tell!?”

“I don’t know how it was destroyed, but such a solid gate would not crumble by itself.”

“It is as you said, Sir Strategist. Actually ——“

Coignieres described the tactics of the enemy.

There were people hiding inside the barrels of gunpowder they thought they had captured. The people hiding inside even blew themselves up after being brought to the gate.
Regis frowned.

“… To think up of such a plan… The ones inside will definitely die if it works…”

The opposing strategist was known as Oswald, and there were intelligence reports saying he was the de facto commander.

Altina who heard the story together with Regis became furious.

“What kind of person is this!? He sends his soldiers to blow themselves up!”

“… That’s true.”

Regis nodded.

He didn’t speak up to avoid any misunderstandings as there were many soldiers around.

But in reality, Regis didn’t think Oswald’s tactics were that nasty.

Ordering a battalion to charge with the knowledge that they would suffer a certain number of casualties, or committing a small number of troops to a battle plan they had no chance of surviving —— Was it any different from these crimes?

The former was fine, and the latter was evil?

Kill one man, and you are a murderer, kill ten thousand men, and you are a hero?

Oswald's actions wouldn't be judged by a court of law.

But wartime actions could be pursued after the fact.

This would probably be added into the negotiation terms in some form after the war between the Belgaria Empire and High Britannia ends.

Or maybe the Empire will go on the counter offensive and invade them.

Latreille would be the one to judge this. Leaving the succession of the throne aside, he was still the Field Marshal in command of all forces.

Since the war has started, it would be up to him to decide when it ends.

Coignieres sighed.

"I was lightly injured in the earlier battle, so I was in the medical room deep inside the fort and escaped death. However, the commander of the Third Army, Lieutenant General Buxlow and the Sun Knights were…"

"Is that so…"

Regis closed his eyes in mourning.

To be honest, he couldn't accept this.

If the enemy launched an assault, then ran away with their cannons and gunpowder left behind, one should consider the possibility of it being a trap, even more so if the opposing commander was known for being cunning.

If you bite onto something that was obviously a bait, that would be no different than the fishes in a pond.

Latreille achieved numerous victories and his capability as a commander was exemplary. But he was weak to such underhanded

tricks, probably due to his personality being too frank.

Or maybe his subordinates acted on their own?

Regis didn't think about things like —— *If only I was there.*

"I don't know what their schemes are, but it is probably a trap", if Regis gave such advice, he would only be mocked as a coward in the Empire.

He knew his proposals would not be accepted.

"Has Prince Latreille returned to the capital?"

"Yes, even though the High Britannia army left, there is still a chance they would go around the back and assault the capital."

"Hmm… And reports on High Britannia's movements?

"We are tracking them, but there aren't any reports yet."

"I see."

To be safe, Regis asked about contacting the capital and the security of the region.

Altina asked at this moment.

"Regis, do we camp out here? Or move inside the fort?"

"Since only the Seventh Army are garrisoned here, there should be room to spare. We will enter via the south gate and bunk in the rooms there."

Altina then left to convey the message to the troops.

They had not been able to sleep under a roof for a long while, so cheers of joy came from the soldiers.
Regis shifted his gaze to the debris.

"Was it Prince Latreille's orders to clear the rubble?"

"Yes, because Fort Bonaire is a key defence of the capital, so we have to repair it as soon as possible. But with our current speed, it will take a month to clear the rubble. Will it be fine?"

“It’s true that if another nation aside from High Britannia forces invade deep inside Imperial territory, it would be dangerous. But it’s not very likely for them to reach the capital.

“Hmm…”

“Worried about something?”
“If High Britannia returns, only the Seventh Army would be here to fend them off. But after the defeat at Lafressange and the losses in the battle in this fort, we have less than ten thousand men left. Everyone’s exhausted too.”

“Ahh… If the High Britannia army shows up, then abandon the fort.”
“Eh!?”
“It is impossible to defend this fort in its current state. It will be the same for the enemy, so it’s fine to give it to them.”

“Ah, I see!”

“Even if they want to defend this place, they will surrender sooner or later because of a lack of supplies. The enemy would not make such a foolish choice, so you don’t need to worry about them coming back.”

“Indeed… It is as Sir Strategist says!”

Coignieres’ expression brightened up.

As he muttered softly:

“Sometimes, I wonder if we would have already defeated the High Britannians if Sir Strategist had been by Prince Latreille’s side...”

“Haha… How could that be…”

Regis shook his head.

After this, the Fourth Army entered Fort Bonaire.

The plains that served as the battlefield just recently were dyed red by the setting sun.

It was the colour of blood, adding an eery feeling to the beautiful sunset.

A group bearing the standards of the Empire appeared to the north of the fort.

The carriage drawn by two horses was surrounded on all sides by cavalry

It was an envoy from the capital.

The Imperial Seventh Army was responsible for the defence of Fort Bonaire, but the one with the highest rank here was Altina.

Normally, Altina would be the one to receive the envoy. There were people who would leave it to their subordinates, but Altina wasn't such a person.
The presence of the Strategist Regis was also requested.

At that time, Regis was lying like a corpse on the bed of his assigned room, and got up because of the intense knocking on the door.

Following the lead of Coignieres' subordinate, Regis entered the conference room.

From the wide room, the destroyed southern fort gate could be seen through the windows.

The windows were damaged too, probably because of the explosion.

Altina was already seated on a chair at the long table, but there weren't any signs of the envoy.

Regis lowered his head.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Thank you for coming Sir Regis, this way, please."

Coignieres stood up and ushered him to the seat beside Altina.

This made Regis anxious.

After sitting down, Regis surveyed the room once more.

Clothes draped the walls in the traditional style of Imperial forts. It was a building for waging war, but they paid a lot of attention to the minor details in decoration, and they even painted the ceiling with a picture of God and His messengers.
Being passionate about war and art, that was the culture of this country.

From the innermost seat, the order of seating was Altina, Regis, Benjamin, Jestin and Coignieres.

These were the only people that were present.
“Where’s Sir Jerome?”
“He seemed to be tending to the horses.”

“He is really focused on such things.”

“That’s right.”
He probably thought that dealing with the envoy was a hassle, and that Regis will report the details to him after this anyway.

Before the conference began, Coignieres made idle chatter, saying ‘Field Marshall Latreille directed our forces from here, looking down at the enemy formations from this window’.

Regis asked again to confirm.

“… He observed the battlefield through this window?”

“Yes, he will discuss the enemy formation with his adjutant, First Grade Admin Officer, Germain.”

“… But the Prince was injured in an earlier battle, is his health okay?”
“Now that you mention it, he did summon the doctor to his room several times. But he stood at the very head of the formation when we were preparing to move out towards the end, so there shouldn’t be any problem.”

“Is that so.”

Regis was concerned when he met him earlier as he seemed a bit strange…

But there didn’t seem to be any problem with his health.

The voice of a soldier came from the other side of the room.

“The envoy from the capital is requesting an audience!”

After confirming with Altina with his eyes, Coignieres said:

“Granted.”

“Yes Sir!”

The door opened.

The one who entered with four lightly armoured cavalry was a woman in long robes who did a curtsey.

Her hair reached her waist, with long eyelashes, a beauty with pretty features.

She gave others the impression of sensibility.

She was about Regis’ age.
“Greetings, I am General Affairs Officer Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde from Ministry of Military Affairs.”

Regis heard that family name before.

Altina tilted her head.

“Tiraso Laverde? Are you Eleanor’s sister?”

“Yes, thank you for taking care of my elder sister earlier. I am honoured by the chance to greet you.”

She smiled elegantly.

It was a minute action, but it made it clear that she was a lady from an aristocratic clan.

“Then why are you working in the Ministry of Military Affairs, House Tiraso Laverde is both a Dukedom and a tycoon in the south correct?”

General Affairs Officers were considered soldiers, but they basically won’t head to the battlefield.
Most of their staff would work inside the Ministry of Military Affairs.

Deputies of high ranking officers and nobles who couldn't even wield a sword would normally work there to earn the title of a soldier.

Their jobs were similar to Inspectors.

As it was a non combat role, they would employ women too, although that was rare…

Fanrine made it look like she was pondering.

"Why I joined the Ministry of Military Affairs? Well… I am different from my sister, I am not interested in business, and not good in numbers."

"You need to deal with numbers in Ministry of Military Affairs too right!?"
"Ara, that's true… Heehee."

An unfathomable woman.

She didn't show any signs of fear in front of the Altina who was a Princess and the commander of the Fourth Army. She also rivaled her sister in a way.

Regis pulled the topic back on track.

"I thought General Affairs Officers won't leave the Ministry of Military Affairs building… Why did you come all the way to a battlefield?"

"Because I have pressing matters. Firstly, this…"

She handed a letter to Altina.

It was wax sealed with the stamp of Ministry of Military Affairs.

Altina opened it.

An order from the Ministry of Military Affairs.

> —— Varden Grand Duchy is mustering their forces from all of Germania, there is a possibility they will attack Fort Volks again. The Fourth Army is to head for Fort Volks and prepare the defences against an

invasion.

Altina kicked her chair away and stood up.

“Isn’t this a grave matter!?”

Benjamin and Jansen’s expression turned stiff too.

Fanrine Veronica was shocked too. The messengers often weren’t told of the contents of their letters, even more so for General Affairs Officers who weren’t messengers.

“... Can I take a look?”

Regis pulled the letter to him from the side and read.

This was usually a rude behavior, but Altina didn’t mind so there wasn’t any issue. Regis couldn’t give any advice as the strategist without knowing the details.

The letter mentioned all sorts of information.
He browsed through the letter.

“Hmm… I see… there are reports from the spies we sent to the Germanian Federation too.”

Regis took some actions to set up his own intelligence network, but he was lacking in manpower and fundings.
Altina swung her arm.

“Now is not the time to take it easily, Regis!”

“It’s fine, there is a possibility of an attack, but it is still in the preparation stage. Our troops are exhausted too, it would be for the

best if we can set off the day after tomorrow. Please take a seat for now, Princess."

"Yes…"

Altina pulled back the chair she kicked away and sat down.

"... Hmm, there is another piece of information… Regarding the east."

"Eh? What?"

Coignieres leaned forth.

Regis handed the letter to Coignieres as he read out the part in question.

"Relations with Estaburg that borders us to the east are expected to deteriorate, so the Seventh Army is to standby against threats from the east —— That's the gist of it."

"Dividing the capital's defense force? They are certain that the High Britannia army will definitely retreat?"

Coignieres was troubled.

Regis nodded.

"It says that the High Britannia army is headed north towards the Germania Federation. Although it is still in Imperial territory… Well, the First Army would be enough to deal with them —— That's probably what the Ministry of Military Affairs thinks."

"Is it really okay? The north is under the jurisdiction of the Third Army, but Lieutenant General Buxlow died in battle and the Sun Knights are lost, there is a need to regroup."
"... Indeed, the northern defences are really weak."

Because the Second and Third Army took heavy losses in the battle with High Britannia, it led to a huge gap in the frontlines.

There were reserves too, but their deployment was ineffective and problematic.

Coignieres read the letter again.

“Hmm… Why do they think the relations with Estaburg are expected to deteriorate? We fought with that nation for many years, but didn’t the Emperor take in a concubine from them as proof of amiable relations?”

From the perspective of the Belgaria Empire, Estaburg was just a small Kingdom. However, they had strong expansionist ideals, and was taking territory from neighbouring countries to strengthen their forces.

But the King of Estaburg was already fifty, and such a trend was weakening.

For the Belgaria Empire, considering the increasing tense relation they had with Germania and High Britannia, they didn’t want to commit too much forces to the east either.

As a result, the two nations formed an alliance, and the Belgarian Emperor took Princess Johaprecia Octovia as his concubine.

But the Ministry of Military Affairs was expecting relations between the nations to deteriorate, and even drew the forces defending the capital to defend against them.

Regis was baffled too.

“… Even if the Emperor passed away, it had just been half a year since our alliance, there is no reason to declare war. And High Britannia is retreating now… why are they expecting relations to deteriorate?”

Regis had a few ideas in mind.

But it would be faster to ask someone who knew, so he turned his eyes to Fanrine.

“… Can you tell us the reason why relations with the Kingdom of Estaburg is breaking down?”

She hesitated for a moment, but still answered.

“That’s because… Imperial Consort Johaprecia has died.”

“What!?”

Regis stood up in surprise.

Altina was dumbstruck and Coignieres opened his eyes wide.

She continued:

“Grieving over the death of the Emperor, she killed herself to be with him.”

“Impossible…”
Regis uttered unconsciously.

It’s hard to accept.
The passing of the Emperor meant Johaprecia would lose her standings in the court, but she would still be able to live a luxurious life, and had no reason to commit suicide.

Altina frowned too.
“Grieving over the death of the Emperor, she killed herself to be with him? That woman doesn’t have that sort of personality.”

She put it in a rather mean way.

But Regis agreed with her.
Even just looking from afar during the Founding Day banquet, her demeanour didn’t seem to be like someone who would follow the Emperor in death.

Even though it was possible that her actions and her thinking were completely different, the dissonance was too great.

Regis asked Fanrine:

“Do you know how Consort Johaprecia committed suicide?”

“Although it is not appropriate for me to say this… she stabbed her own chest with a fruit knife.”

Regis frowned.

Impossible.

Altina couldn’t accept it too.

“Isn’t that strange? They say that father died of old age, but he was really lively when I last saw him though? And he ate lots of meat too.”

“… Queer indeed.”

“It’s obviously suspicious.”

Benjamin said after hearing all this.

“I might be overthinking… but is everyone here suspecting Prince Latreille?”

“We didn’t really…”

Regis wanted to conceal it, but Altina said directly:

“No matter how you think about it, it’s suspicious!”
Benjamin shook his head.

“I believe in His Highness, he is always thinking about the Empire’s future, and would never do something so terrible for his own greed.”
“I can’t believe him though. When I asked if he poisoned Auguste, he didn’t give a clear denial.”

“What!?”

“It seems Latreille didn’t wish for the case with Auguste to happen, and it’s possible that he didn’t do it… But there are no doubts in the courts about his will to be Emperor, and is aiming for the right opportunity from the shadows like a vicious snake.

She said that in a tone that was more regretful than angry.

Benjamin started perspiring.
“But His Highness wouldn’t do that for his own interest…”

It was true that Latreille wasn’t someone who would prioritize personal gains, and had the courage and responsibility to brave through dangers for the sake of the Empire, a real commander in

spirit and soul.

But that was why Regis felt is was even more suspicious.

“… This might be the result after he considered what was the best for the Empire.”
“What!?”

Latreille was worried about the future of the Empire and killed the Emperor —— Such an idea was too disrespectful, and Regis didn’t state it out loud.

Altina shrugged.

“That guy does worry for the Empire in his own way… and will become reckless for the sake of becoming Emperor. Sir Benjamin, do you remember?”

“What do you mean?”

“You captured a silver haired maid from Felicia’s family home.”

“Ugh!? T-That is…!!”

The First Prince Auguste died because of poison, and his sister Felicia acted on her mother's order------- The order of the Second Imperial Consort was for Felicia to dress like her elder brother and live her life as Auguste.

And Felicia’s stand in was a silver haired maid who looked like Felicia living in a mansion in Trouin Dukedom, pretending to be sick.

That was about a year ago.

After that, on Founding Day, as a means to push Auguste (Felicia) to the brink, Latreille wanted to bring that maid to the banquet directly to expose their schemes.

And the one who barged into the Trouin mansion to take that maid away was Benjamin who commanded the Second Army.

Altina shrugged.
“There’s nothing more to say about that incident now. But Latreille would do such a thing to become Emperor, that’s why I am doubtful.”

“Ugh… Muu…”

Benjamin couldn’t answer.

It was fine for Altina to talk about this as a royal, but if Benjamin replied in a similar tone, he would be charged with Lèse-majesté.

Fanrine looked surprised, but didn’t say anything.

Regis got back on topic.
“Anyway, no matter what we think, Prince Latreille would be on guard. He should understand that he would be under a lot of suspicion because of the circumstances. As for the Consort, Johaprecia, even though she didn’t look like someone who would commit suicide, there are all sorts of people in this world. It is impossible for others to fully understand, so we can’t be certain about this.”

“T-That’s true…”
Benjamin nodded.

“There are some parts I am concerned about, but the intelligence we have right now is nothing more than rumours. Let’s not doubt Prince Latreille because of baseless suspicions, let’s take care of our unit first.”

They finally ended the talk that had strayed away from the main topic.

The incident of Johaprecia committing suicide was filled with suspect points, but there was nothing he could do about it.
Regis thought.

—— I already took measures, but it wasn’t enough.

He had chosen a few soldiers that could carry out undercover work, and despatched them to the capital to collect intelligence.

But they were not professionals after all, so they couldn’t handle this emergency and achieve any results. They didn’t relay any effective intelligence to him, and it was the first time Regis heard the news about Consort Johaprecia.

The intelligence agents belonged to the Ministry of Military Affairs, which meant they worked for Latreille.

Grand nobles would have their own intelligence network.

It would be really difficult to set up an intelligence network in the capital if he only starts now.

—— Was I a step behind again?

It was difficult.

He already knew that, but he couldn't rely on choosing the best methods available to him based on the circumstances. He couldn't wait for things to happen and then react to it like he had been doing all this while. He needed to take the initiative.

There was a need to be a little more reckless.
The sound of knocking came from the door.
The maid Clarisse entered and bowed deeply.
She was acting like a different person as usual. She would be emotionless when others were around, and would speak in a monotone.

"It is already time for dinner, would everyone like to dine now?"

"Ahh, it's that late already. Just send it here. Please join us, Officer Fanrine."

"Ara! Thank you, I am deeply honoured!"

Fanrine curtsied gracefully.

Clarisse left the conference room.
After that, a large amount of dishes were sent in.

Ham, sausage, potatoes and fried cabbages were laid on the table, along with honey, warm soup and soft bread.

They received food resupply at the fort, so their dinner was more sumptuous than usual.
With the table full, Regis laid out his maps on the wall.

It was a map of Fort Volks and a map of Estaburg to the east.

“Well… Compared to the Belgaria Empire, the Kingdom of Estaburg is a small nation, but they have a strong presence in the east. Their plan should be to let Consort Johaprecia give birth to a baby boy with red hair and eyes, then place him onto the throne as the next Emperor… in an ambitious attempt to control the Empire.”

This wasn’t anything special. The consort who was taken in like a hostage giving birth to a child that becomes Emperor, and then providing the home nation of the consort with various advantages. This had happened several times in the long history of the Empire.

Regis shifted the topic to the other map.

“Fort Volks had the reputation for being impregnable for the longest time, and wouldn’t fall easily now. There are 2000 men garrisoned in the fort, and 13,000 men in the Fourth Army, making a total of 15,000… a bit too many.”

With confirmation that the High Britannians were gone, the capital was no longer under threat. The noble army that was called upon to participate would return to their original unit, but they numbered less than a thousand and would not affect the combat potential too much.

Altina frowned.

“It would be great if Fort Volks has more soldiers, but it would be troubling if the other fronts are short on manpower.”

“It is as you said, and there is the problem of budget… So, let’s talk about the east again…”

Altina and Benjamin started digging into their dinner. Steam came out of the potato and meat, spreading their fragrance throughout the room.

Fanrine was invited to dine too.

When he heard Regis mention the place he would be deployed to, Coignieres stopped eating and listened with a serious expression.

Regis continued:

“The terrain here is uneven, and with the wide forest, it would be

difficult to deploy cavalry. The enemy is proficient in hiding in the forest and firing their bows, it would be difficult to handle. The strength of the Empire is the deployment of our forces on a large scale and overwhelming the enemy, but Estaburg tactics revolved around surprise attacks in small groups."

Coignieres was impressed and said.

"Have you been assigned to the east before, Sir Strategist?"

"No, I only read the reports available in the capital, do correct me if I made any mistakes."

"There's nothing wrong, but since that's not the place you were assigned to, why did you read the reports about that area?"

"Eh? Because I had the permission to do so, I had read everything a commoner non-commissioned officer was permitted to read."

"I-Is that so!? But why!?"

Coignieres was surprised.

Regis scratched his head.

"No, leaving my matters aside for now… I think there are 5,000 men garrisoned in the east right? What about the composition?"

"Your numbers are right. Most of them are rookies and old men, it's difficult to send them on a long expedition."
"They're not ready for battle."

"True."

"And the Seventh Army?"
Coignieres took out a folded paper from his waist pocket.

"Hmm… Original strength is 21,000, became 10,000 after the battle of Lafressange, and is now 8,000 after the defensive battle in Fort Bonaire."

"The defensive battle…?"
"Both the casualty and those who fell ill increased…"

“Because the war dragged on.”
“The fatigue and injuries from the consecutive battles played a part… But there is also the issue of supplies. The amount delivered was less than what was promised, and the food sent were rotten.”
“How awful.”
“Because the Ministry of Military Affairs didn’t send enough, we had to purchase from the towns nearby…”

Coignieres showed a pained expression…

He looked really troubled.

Altina became worried.

“Our unit is fine right? Why?”

“There were many instances of supplies sent by the Ministry of Military Affairs being embezzled along the way, so we sent troops to the source of the supplies, confirming the quantity day and night, ensuring that nothing goes missing along the way.”
“You did that!?”

Not just Altina, Coignieres and Benjamin were shocked too.
It was something written in books so it wasn’t anything rare, but they didn’t seem to know.
Coignieres was just a knight earlier, and was only promoted to command because his superior fell in battle.

While Benjamin’s army was mainly tasked with the defence of the capital, and wouldn’t go on long campaigns.

Even though it was a war with the survival of the Empire on the line, there were still morons who would embezzle the supplies. This was probably beyond their imagination.

Regis said with a sigh:

“The greed of an individual leading to the loss of many lives… The cause of these foolish crimes isn’t so much the lack of morality, but having weak imagination. Running short of supplies would result in the troops on the frontline starving and falling ill, leading to the collapse of the frontline and the destruction of the Empire. Those

who stole the supplies won't think about all that, and commit the crime from the shallow thinking that 'it would be fine since no one is watching', which is regrettable…"

"Hmmm…"

Coignieres started groaning.

People were especially lacking in their imagination when there were dire consequences.

Everyone knew that murdering for the sake of money was a serious crime, and only the most hardcore of criminals would do that.

But people couldn't fathom that embezzling the supplies was a serious crime that might lead to thousands of people starving to death.
Cutting corners on construction materials and choosing the person in charge based on personal preference, such indirect actions were the same.

The ignorant ones who lack imagination were scarier than the most hardcore of criminals sometimes.

Regis got back on topic:

"… Before the war with High Britannia, the eastern front lines had about 26,000 men. The Seventh Army are 13,000 strong right now, even if they make up for it by changing the way they fight, there will be a limit to its effectiveness."

"We already requested reinforcement from the Ministry of Military Affairs…"

"All of our units suffered heavy losses in this war, it would be hard to get replacements immediately, so I propose… How about letting a part of the Fourth Army support the Seventh Army? I have yet to check the details, but we can pull out 6,000 men…"

"That would be wonderful!"

Coignieres stood up agitatedly.

Regis looked towards Benjamin.

“I would like the former Second Army to be the core of the Fourth Army splinter unit they’re sent to support the eastern front. Of course, there would be some former Beilschmidt Border Regiment officers going as well…”

“It’s a fine arrangement.”

Benjamin nodded.

Right now, the former Beilschmidt Border Regiment and former Second Army soldiers still couldn’t coordinate in battle.

It would still take some time for them to integrate.

If the budget of the Seventh Army could share the load, they could avoid the problem of maintaining a large force.

Dispatching good officers along would help in their training, so the two groups could work better in concert the next time they met.

And Benjamin was a noble from the Latreille faction, it would be easier on him to support the Seventh Army instead of working alongside Altina.
To be honest, they probably prefered returning to Latreille in the capital, but they couldn’t ignore the order from the Ministry of Military Affairs.
Of course, it would be great if Regis could pull the soldiers of the Second Army to his side right now… But it wasn’t that easy to win over people.

If he was careless and appointed an inadequate commander, the troops would be resistant.
Anyway, they were running short on officers.

Experienced, popular, able to grasp orders accurately, capable of adapting in the ever changing battlefield, and most importantly —— loyalty.

There might be a day in the future where they have to oppose the new emperor Latreille, they would need soldiers loyal enough to

follow Altina even if they were branded rebels.

Regis checked the map again.

“… We will decide on the details of the manpower allocation later. The troops are exhausted from the consecutive fights and expedition, so I propose we will rest for today and tomorrow, and move out the morning two days later.”

“That’s great!”
Altina nodded.

Coignieres who was already standing saluted.
“Thank you everyone for your help! We were saved by the Beilschmidt Border Regiment during the battle of Lafressange, I will never forget what you have done for us. Please contact us if you require anything in the future!”

Altina stood up too.

And extended her right hand.

“Thank you! I will look forward to it!”

“Yes!”
They shook hands.

It wasn’t Regis’ intention, but an alliance with the Seventh Army was formed.

Lafressange then looked towards Regis’ way with a smile.

“If we encounter an enemy as strong as the High Britannians, please allow us to fight under the command of Sir Strategist.”

“No… I am not the commander, the Princess is the one in command.”

When Regis said that, Altina patted his shoulder.

“It’s fine! Regis devices all the plans in our unit, everyone knows that!”
“No, that is…”
He was happy to be relied on, but was it fine for the commander to

be solely devoted to martial combat? Regis started worrying about her.

After their conversation ended, they would need to start the preparations to reorganize the army and head back to Fort Volks —— Fanrine who had been dining quietly at the end of the table raised her hand.

“Can I say something?”
“What is it?”
Altina asked.

“I didn’t come here to just deliver the orders from the Ministry of Military Affairs… Can you read this?”

Fanrine said as she took out another letter.

And she was facing Regis.
“... Is it for me?”
“Yes, from the Ministry of Military Affairs.”
“For me… from the Ministry…?”

He had a bad feeling about this.

Orders for Regis Auric.

A summon from the Ministry of Military Affairs and the Ministry of Aristocracy.

And they want him to report immediately.

“T-This is…”

The tone on the letter was really strong.

Altina peeked from the side and started reading ——

She then banged the table.

“We are preparing to set off for Fort Volks right now! How can Regis

answer this summon!”
In response to Altina’s outburst, Fanrine lowered her head in apology.

“I am sorry, he might not have received it, but the summon for Sir Auric was sent in February, and had been ignored for almost half a year.”

“Even if you say that, how many battlefields did you think we went to!?”

“You are right… we will need to discuss the compensation including his war merits. That’s why we need to complete his promotion to Third Grade Admin Officer and knighting ceremony. Are there any problems?”

“Is there a bigger problem then drawing the strategist away from the frontlines!?”

“Erm… I am just a General Affairs Officer conveying what War Administration Minister Beylard said: ‘I won’t acknowledge a Third Grade Admin Officer being the strategist for the Fourth Army’...”

“What do he mean by won’t acknowledge!? No matter what the ministers say, Regis protected the Empire! He thinks we can fight a war with rank epaulettes!?”

“Ughhh… My apologies.”

Fanrine backed away.

Regis started soothing Altina.
“... Don’t be mad, even if you tell her that…”
“But this is…!”

“I have yet to accept my nomination officially, so the Ministry still sees me as a Fifth Grade Admin Officer. It’s true that it would be hard to understand why drawing away a Fifth Grade Admin Officer would be an issue.”
Ignoring the facts for now, Regis could understand the Ministry perspective.

Fanrine nodded eagerly.

“Soldiers have the obligation to obey the orders of the Ministry of Military Affairs, and the Ministry of Aristocracy had earlier requested for the presence of Sir Auric… They are questioning why he has yet to respond…”

“Well, like I said, it wasn’t the time to do all that…”

Regis sighed in resignation.

He already submitted the reports, but they didn’t acknowledge the exceptions.

“Sorry, because the Ministry of Aristocracy raised a strong protest… ‘Can’t the Ministry of Military Affairs monitor the movement of their soldiers?’, ‘Is he looking down on the aristocratic system?’, ‘Is he a democrat?’ they even asked question like this, and are visiting every week.”

“Ahh, I see… becoming a cavalier is something like the goal of a lifetime for commoners, and normal people will put aside everything and rush to them. Being ignored for months would be a slap on the face to them.”
“The summons of the Ministry of Military Affairs was also ignored, this is literally disobeying orders.”

“No, that…”

“I heard that the message sent to the borders didn’t arrive. So they won’t pursue the earlier summons, but on the other hand, they sent me this time. I have been ordered that I absolutely have to bring you back…”

“Sorry for the trouble…”

“No, I am happy that I get to meet Sir Auric. But your position will become worse if you don’t go… So, can you answer the summon from the Ministry of Military Affairs?”

Regis crossed his arms troublingly.

According to the intelligence report, there was a good chance there

would be a battle in Fort Volks again.

Even though they had more soldiers, the coordination within the unit was lacking, and the more troops there are, the harder it would be to deploy them effectively.

—— Was it fine for him to leave the unit?

“Would the promotion and conferment of nobility be finished by a short trip to the capital and submitting a few forms? If that is so, it shouldn’t take long.”
“Unfortunately, the document processing in the Ministry of Aristocracy would need quite a bit of time. Even though it’s not hereditary, it is still the conferment of a title to a commoner. There will be a lot of things to remember, so it will be time consuming.”

“About how long?”

“From a week to a month.”
“That’s quite long…”

Work of the bureaucracy was the same as usual, the rigidness of their formalities were proportional to their inefficiency.

“It is the same for the Ministry of Military Affairs, aside from the promotion papers, there will be an exam on military regulations. What Third Grade and above need to know is different from Fourth Grade and below, it will take time to learn them.”

“Such a headache, I should have rejected the promotion and the title…”
“Please don’t joke about this!”
Fanrine opened her eyes wide.

A General Affairs Officer was dispatched because the summoned was ignored, they will think Regis was a rebel if he turn them down now.

In the end, a promotion was an order, not a reward. Just like a demotion, it wasn’t something you could reject.

“Well… it would be possible if I resign from the army…”

“Ara, I heard that my sister wanted to recruit you, you want to be a merchant?”
“No no…”

Altina slammed the table again.

“That won’t do!”

“I won’t be a merchant, Your Highness.”
What he was considering was resigning his army commission and traveling with the Fourth Army.

The former soldiers from Beilschmidt Border Regiment should be fine, they recognized Altina as their commander, and Jerome held sway over them.
They probably would listen to his proposed plans even if Regis resigns from the army.

But what about the new troops? It would be hard to earn their trust.

If his subordinates didn’t trust him, the plans would never work.

“Anyway, I won’t agree to that!”

Altina announced firmly as she shook her head.
Fanrine showed a troubled expression.

“But…”

“Regis is in the middle of his unit’s assignment, it would be a great loss if he leaves now! I have read some military regulations too, the commanders have some say over the movement of their subordinates, and the Ministry have to recognize my protest!”
“Yes… But High Britannia have retreated, and the chance of a battle taking place during this period is low, so we think out summons are appropriate.”
Altina clenched her fists.

She seemed adamant in rejecting this.
“What a nonsensical and conceited bunch! What do the Ministry of Military Affairs people who have never been to the frontlines know!? Low chances of a battle!? Did they think the chances were high

when High Britannia attacked!? The Ministry didn't anticipate the attack of the enemy and underestimate the power of the new rifles and steamships, how many soldiers do they think died because of this!?"
Espionage was under the purview of the Ministry of Military Affairs.

If there was more intelligence about the new rifles, high speed steam ships and High Britannia's mustering and mobilization of their army, Belgaria would have fought with a different strategy.

After seeing so many dead bodies, it couldn't be helped if Altina didn't trust the judgement of the Ministry of Military Affairs.
Bards might sing about Altina's beauty, but she was just like a starving *loup gris* when she was angry.

Even veteran soldiers would be wary of her.

But Fanrine maintained her soft approach, and said in a soothing tone.

"For Sir Auric's future, this is definitely not a bad thing."

"Ugh…"

Altina was dumbstruck.
Regis didn't think much about promotions and conferment of titles.
Now that Latreille had a decisive advantage, making up for his failure took priority.

The goal of making Altina Empress —— Was gradually becoming impossible.
What should he do to change the Empire? Regis had been trying to find a new path forward.

However, Altina probably thought that she didn't have the right to deny Regis his promotion and title, so she slouched her shoulders and looked depressed.

"… That's right… Regis accomplished so much after all, I am sorry."
Regis scratched his head.

"Well, let's calm down first and think it through."

“Yeah.”

Altina nodded weakly.
Regis asked Fanrine.
“Officer Tiraso Laverde, can you give us some time to discuss this matter?”

“Fufu… To avoid confusing me and my sister Eleanor, just call me Fanrine, Sir Auric.”
“Is that so? Then call me Regis too.”

“Ara, it’s an honour, I will take you up on it. As for the time, I can’t wait too long, but a few days would be fine.”

“Thank you, I will give a reply tomorrow.”

Fanrine nodded with a warm smile.

“Understood, Sir Regis.”

Deep into the night, the desk assigned to Regis was filled with all sorts of documents, it even covered his bed.

The light from his lamp flickered.

A large quantity of documents were sent to him by a carriage, he felt impressed that they managed to send it in one trip.

He had basically finished dividing the soldiers going back to Fort Volks and those supporting the eastern front, and the finer details would be up to the officers on scene.

As for his personal problems, he had to consider them from all aspects.

In order to do so, Regis kept moving the quill in his hand.

“Hmm… So… This is the only way…”

Regis lifted the oil lamp, a high class equipment prepared by Altina.

It had the shape of a tea pot, and could be moved by holding the brass handle.

He used candles in the past, but the oil lamp was several times brighter, which made administrative work much easier.
It was easier to walk along the corridors at night too.

Altina's room was nearby, just at the end of the corridor.

The two guards on night sentry saluted.
Then said softly:

"... Sir Strategist, the Princess has retired for the night."

"Ahh, it's already that late?"

"That's right."
"Hmm… This is troubling… I have documents I have to finish by tomorrow morning, and need Her Highness to verify…"

The sentries looked at each other.

Together with Regis, the three of them looked troubled.

A metallic noise rung out.

It was the sound of a door unlocking.

The door to Altina's room behind the sentries opened gradually.

Faint light shone through the gaps.

Regis couldn't see anyone, but heard a voice:

"... Regis?"

"Ah, pardon me for disturbing at this hour."

They didn't make any noise loud enough to wake her, and from the light in her room, Altina probably hasn't turned in yet.

She opened the door ajar, showed herself and said:
"If you think it is necessary, you can wake me at anytime. I am not an incompetent commander who will chase my strategist away because it is night."

“... I think strategists who wake the commander up in the middle of the night are pretty incompetent.”

Regis shrugged.

Fufu, Altina laughed.

“I will look forward to our sleep deprived conversation then.”
“…. Maybe we should do this tomorrow?”
“Regis?”

“Haha… Pardon me for barging in.”

Regis nodded to the sentries and walked past them, and the sentries saluted with their back straight.

He grabbed the knob and opened the door.

And closed it after heading in.

Paintings adorn the walls of the large room, and the curtains had beautiful laces.

Altina wore white pyjamas under the candle light. Her silk cloth was decorated with small laces and ribbons..

Her body line could be vaguely seen under her clothes.

Regis backed away on reflex.
“Uwahh!?”

“Don’t make weird noises, the sentries will misunderstand when they hear that.”

The room was built and light noises could not be heard outside, but sound would still travel if they were too loud.

“Why… Why are you dressed like this…”

Regis covered his eyes with his hands, but he could still see through the gaps.
“I was about to sleep so it couldn’t be helped, or you want me to sleep in a corset? I would rather sleep in armour.”

“… You want me to step outside for a moment?”
“Is my dressing that important? Then turn around, I will change right now.”

“I am sorry, there isn’t much time too so let’s just stay like this. If you don’t mind.”

“I will lose if I mind!”

Altina put her hands on her hips proudly.

Although she said that, her cheeks were still a little red.

She feels embarrassed after all! — Regis thought, but didn’t say it out loud. He didn’t come to see Altina in her pyjamas or to discuss that.

“… About that thing earlier in the evening.”

“Right, how should we answer the ministry?”

“Let me ask first… What do you think we should do?”

“I can’t imagine Regis leaving the unit for a month. Even if there are no battles, I am worried about the unit breaking down.”

“There are mountains of problems after all…”

“Well, I think putting all the load on me isn’t feasible for the long term, but there isn’t any way to increase the number of admin officers in a short period of time or find someone to cover for me on so short a notice.”

“… Hmm, that’s true.”

To be frank, Regis very much wanted to hand it off to someone else if he could.

He barely managed to keep on top of things in Fort Sierck, and when they shifted their base to Fort Volks, he asked soldiers who were literate to help with the paperwork.

But after the formation of the Fourth Army and their numbers exceeded ten thousands, it exceeded the number they could handle.

There were admin officers in the Second Army too, but after their defeat by High Britannia, they either deserted or died in battle, only a few apprentice admin officers were left.

From the scale of the Fourth Army, they would need a thousand admin officers. If they don't have a hundred officers, they couldn't even complete the requisition for the basic necessities.

It was natural that Altina felt Regis was indispensable.

It was hard to say this.
But he had to.

Regis stared at her like this.

Her pupils were red under the glow of the orange light, and her vermillion fringe swayed gently.

She placed her hand on her chest and started fidgeting.

"Ehh? You are still concerned about my dressing…? Don't stare like this…"

"Ah… No… Anyway, listen to me."

"What?"

Regis wavered. He wasn't sure if this was the best way, but he was certain this wasn't safe.

But if it works, he would reap huge rewards.

Ughh, he clenched his fists.

And looked into Altina's eyes.

"I want to go to the capital by myself."

"What!?"

Altina was dumbstruck.

It was followed by silence as if they had stopped breathing.

Her shoulders started to tremble.

“... Regis… Are you serious?”
“I am not good at joking and dislike lying.”

“A-Are you abandoning me… Abandoning this unit?”

“That’s not it.”

“... Because… I can’t be Empress anymore… So…”
“Wait, Altina… That’s not the reason. After all, I didn’t become a strategist to make you Empress.”
“You don’t trust me anymore!?”

She looked completely crestfallen.

Regis shook his head.

“We made a promise that day. I will always believe in you. However, we need to make practical decisions now.”

“….”

Altina stared at him with bated breathe.

Her crimson eyes turned misty.

A transparent droplet streaked across her cheek.

“Eh!?”

Regis turned stiff as if his heart was being gripped.

Altina rubbed her eyes.

She turned and pounced onto her bed.

She squatted down with her back to Regis and covered her head with a white sheet.

“Ugh… Ugh…… Uuu…”
“Are, are you crying?”
“I’m not!”

She was obviously sobbing.

During moments like these, the main characters in stories will lean

on the bed, hug her shoulders and say some wonderful lines to stop her tears.

—— I can't do it.

Regis was depressed.

He could only stand beside her.

In front of him, Altina was breathing loudly as she shook with a blanket over her.

A large moon could be seen outside the window.

Wandering stars.

Crossing the celestial river.

"... Altina… I… believe you can wipe the wars away from the Empire. Your wish would be fulfilled one day. The nearest path of doing so is becoming Emperor. I agree that this path is harder now, But I am not giving up."

She grumbled with her back to Regis.
"You are lying…"

"... I hate lies. I might like stories that are made up though. Well, listen to me…"
No response.

But she must be listening.

"There are too many strange points behind the death of the Emperor and Consort Johaprecia. Prince Latreille might look suspicious, but being too suspicious gives the impression that there is something more to it. If it was a planned murder, there is no reason to implicit Consort Johaprecia, she will just be a widow after the passing of the Emperor, she would have no political influence. Estaburg might be upset that their plan failed, but if their daughter still lives, relations between the two nations won't deteriorate to the point of war… It might be inappropriate to say this, but there is no meaning in murdering Consort Johaprecia."

Altina didn't react as expected.
Regis continued patiently.

"... Thinking about it this way, did the Emperor really die of old age, and Consort Johaprecia killed herself? Or was it an accident? Impossible, I can't imagine an accident happening in the courts resulting in their death at the same time, and even if there was, they didn't need to cover it up as suicide. Once you eliminate the impossible, what remains would be a 'planned murder'."

Altina held her breathe.

As expected, the speculation that her brother was the one that killed her father was a big shock to her. But even so, he couldn't stop here as this concerned both Altina and his future.

"... Was the murderer's motive the throne? Or other emotional reasons? No matter what, someone murdered the Emperor and Consort Johaprecia on the spur of the moment — Everything will make sense if that is the case, and that person had the power and authority to cover all this up."

"Someone with the authority?"

Altina finally reacted.
But she kept her back towards him.
"... Covering up the murder of the Emperor and Consort into 'dying of old age' and suicide require immense power, and the only one who can do that right now is Prince Latreille."

"So… that man… killed father?"

Her voice was trembling.

Regis nodded.
"The death of Johaprecia is strange indeed. Like you said, she isn't the type who would commit suicide. And there isn't any political necessity to do so. Someone killed her without a plan — and Prince Latreille is hiding that fact. There is no way of telling whether he did it or is covering up for the murderer."

Altina turned back.

Marks of tears were still on her face.

Under the moonlight, that sight of her pained Regis — but it was beautiful at the same time.
The sheets slipped off her back.

Her unkempt hair covered her pale skin like blood flowing down.

"... Hmm… According to what you said, father was definitely murdered."
Regis nodded.
Of course, his deduction might not be correct.
But it was very plausible.

"... Regicide is a serious crime punishable by death, even if it is committed by a royal. If it really was Prince Latreille, even if he succeeded the throne, he would be proclaimed a false Emperor and stripped of his succession rights."

Altina lowered her legs from the bed.

Regis looked up.

He couldn't see her expression clearly from the illumination of the moon outside the windows, but he caught a glimpse of the light in her misty eyes.

"... Latreille killed father… And I will kill my brother next?"
"What a terrifying topic…"

"This is necessary to change the Empire right?"

"I won't deny it, but it is still in the realm of plausibility for now."

"Is that so…"
Regis' words made Altina lower her head.
Transparent droplets fell again.

Regis didn't know how to stop her tears, his actions or words might make her cry some more, but even so —
"... In order to investigate the truth, I plan to go to the capital. And… Like I mentioned earlier, there is a chance Latreille might change his mind. If he is thinking of consolidating the frontlines, I think we can

work together even if he is a false Emperor.”
“So I will become Latreille’s spouse?”

“Stop kidding, who would want that?”
“What if Latreille requests for that?”

“That would just lose him the commander with the most accomplishment in recent years. Even if the frontlines is consolidated, I don’t think he’s stupid enough to do something like that, so that assumption is pointless.”

“Hmm… Is that so?”

“If Prince Latreille becomes the villain, will Altina want to be his spouse?”

“If Regis doesn’t want it, I will reject him.”
“Ahh, I never considered or wished for that.”
“I see...”
Altina wiped the corner of her eyes with her fingertips.

She was no longer crying.

Regis listed all sorts of reasons.

“No matter how aligned our policies may be, becoming his spouse is too dangerous. There is the possibility of Prince Latreille changing his policies after the marriage. And there are probably people who deduced the same things I did, so Prince Latreille’s crimes might be exposed. The chances you will be treated as a co-conspirator in the murder would be very high.”

“Well, so… you object to the wedding because of political reasons. I knew it!”

Altina pouted.
When she makes such an expression, she would look younger than she actually was.

Regis sighed.

“... Sorry… to be honest, that’s just half the reason.”

“Hmm? And the other half?”

“It’s a very personal… emotion I don’t really understand. I don’t want Altina to become Prince Latreille’s spouse… Sorry for not being able to explain this clearly.”

Regis felt ashamed for this irrational behaviour.

Altina’s face reddened.

“M-Me too… Emotionally, I am appalled by the idea of becoming Latreille’s wife... I think my time spent talking to Regis like this is important to me. If I become someone else’s wife, I won’t be able to talk to you like this, right?”

“... You will leave the unit when you marry. Our relationship won’t be commander and strategist anymore.”

But even if we are a commander and a strategist, we should refrain from meeting in her bedroom, Regis thought.

Altina shook her head.
“I don’t want… to not be able to talk with Regis…”

She rubbed her eyes as tears were about to come out.
The edges of her eyes were red.

“... As long as you are a commander, I will continue to be a strategist. I will leave for a short time, but I will return in no time. I am just going to the capital to gather information. If Fort Volks is attacked, I will rush back even if I have to quit the army.”

“..... Okay.”

She looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end, she just nodded.

Regis nodded too.
“I will be back in no time.”

“Alright, I will do my work properly even if Regis is not around. Hey, Regis is weak, so don’t do anything dangerous in the capital.”

“You don’t need to tell me, I know that very well.”

“Do you need an escort, if only Eric was here…”

“By the way, how is his injury, has he recovered yet? If not for Eric, I would be lying in a grave right now.”

“Belgaria would be in danger if that happened, so Eric is a hero who saved the Empire. After I go back to Fort Volks, I will relay his condition to you in a letter.”

“I will be counting on you… Ahh, that’s right, I will teach you some codes.”

“Codes?”

“A countermeasure to keep the content encrypted if the letter is stolen.”

Regis started listing numbers on a paper as Altina listened happily.

“… Well then, I should go back to my room now, I will prepare the necessary documents by noon tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“Remember to hire some admin officers.”

“I will think of something after I go back to Fort Volks.”

“I will try to negotiate with the Ministry. Ahh, another reason for me to visit the capital.”

The two of them smiled wryly.

Regis then faced the door.

“Do take care of yourself.”

“No problem! I have been training and my body is tough. I have lots of companions and I am good at swordsmanship and horsemanship!”

“That’s true.”

“Regis doesn’t train, is weak, is alone in the capital, can’t use a sword or ride a horse.”

“Haha… I will be careful.”
“Yeah.”

“Well then, good night Altina.”

“See you in the morning, Regis.”

He turned his back to her——

As Regis reached for the door handle.

Altina hugged him from behind suddenly.

“Ehh!?”
“I don’t want… I don’t want you to go…”

She held him tightly.
Regis could feel the warmth of her body.

And the beating of her heart.

Regis could feel his own heart beating so hard as if it was going to break.

“A… Al… Alti…?”

He could feel her strong presence through the thin pyjamas.
“Don’t wanna.”

“Y-You… are you trying to ignore everything we discussed just now?”
“I understand. Regis is going to the capital because you need to, it is important to me and the Empire.”

“That’s great.”

“But…”
“I give up…”

“Can you at least, stay here until tomorrow morning? If you are tired, we can sleep together on the bed.”

It’s harder for him to stay now!

Regis felt troubled.

“Wait wait wait! What are you saying all of a sudden!?”

“... Because… It feels that I won’t be able to see Regis again.”

“I plan to come back after at most a month, wouldn’t it be hard for me to return if you put it that way?”

“You will really come back?”

“Of course.”
“Really really?”

“That’s my plan… and I will send you letters”

“I-I will write too! I am not good at it, but I will work hard! Every day!”

“Every day? No… That is… difficult.”

“I won’t let you go if you don’t write.”

The arms hugging Regis started increasing its strength, and gradually went beyond that of a hug.

“Hurts, it hurts! Ah, I get it! I will write it like a report every day!”

“... Not reports.”
“A letter! Yes, letter! Every day!”

“It’s a promise!”

“But can you really write a letter every day?”

“I will work hard.”
“... I see, I will look forward to it.”

Altina lowered her hands

But she leaned onto Regis’ back just like this.

“Ughh… Regis…… Just… a bit longer…”

Altina started sobbing again.

Her body trembled as she tried to hold back her tears.

For the time being, Regis stood still in place.

Looking out the window, he could see the celestial river flowing across the night sky.

Chapter 3 - Fanrine

The next day.

It started raining early in the morning.

It was terrible weather for camping out. Not only was it cold, but there wasn't a place to sleep, which made the ordeal troublesome. So it was great that they made it to Fort Bonaire, where the soldiers were happy that they could sleep under a roof.

Regis told everyone the plan that he would be heading to the capital during the morning conference.

He would need to leave the unit for more than a month.

Benjamin, Jestin and Coignieres treated this as only natural. In their eyes, this was very normal for a Belgarian soldier.

Bestowing the title of Chevalier to a commoner, they couldn't think of any reason to reject this. This was common sense for the country.
Jerome clicked his tongue and didn't say anything more. Even though he ordered Regis to 'Get out and go back to the capital', the first time they met he seemed to think this was a pity.

Altina nodded quietly. After saying so much to her last night, she finally accepted.
Clarisse who stood at the corner of the room was listening in, but didn't show any emotions or reaction.

After that, the troops were also informed that Regis was leaving the unit.

Nobody was surprised by this decision.

After all, this was a summons from the Ministry of Military Affairs, and he had to carry out the orders unless the commander filed a protest.

Or rather, it would be a bigger surprise if Regis ignored the order and resigned.

If he did resign, he could travel with the unit as Altina's servant, and the soldiers would still follow his plans without question.

However, they were not engaging the enemy right now.

Regis started thinking about the things that occurred to him when he heard about this.

—— There is something I have to do in the capital.

“Well then, for today’s topic. As support for the Seventh Army, the detachment that would be sent to the east…”

“Isn’t the former Second Army taking care of that?”
Altina asked, and Regis scratched his head.

“In the previous battles, there are problems in the coordinations of the units. And of course, improving this would be the main objective for the eastern front line support mission… But if we don’t take some measures against it, we will repeat the same mistakes. That’s why I want to send some former Beilschmidt Border Regiment officers to go with them.”

“You want them to train the Second Army while they support the Seventh Army?”
“Correct.”

Jerome was not thrilled.

“You want to take my subordinates from me again? You know how bloody long the training is going to take?”

“... Sorry. But I think Sir Jerome is very good with nurturing troops.”

“Hmmp! I don’t remember nurturing anything. I just order them to do the necessary training, those who can’t or won’t keep up can just get lost.”

“Willingness to follow orders and keep up with training proves that the soldiers are well disciplined. Most importantly the ability to fight under Sir Jerome’s flag is a sign of valor.”

There weren’t many warriors more terrifying than the ‘Black Knight’ in the entire continent. The soldiers that didn’t falter under his training were definitely brave.

Jerome frowned.

“How irritating… When you say such flattering words, it means you have some sort of scheme.”

“… Not at all.”
“Who are you picking? Who will be sent to the east?”

It’s hard to say this out loud.

But this was the best choice.

Regis said his proposal.

“Erm… Actually… I wish to ask Sir Jerome to go to the east…”

Benjamin groaned.

Jerome had an expression as if he was looking at a retard.

“Are you serious?”

“I thought about other candidates… But the only one who could train the former Second Army to work in the same way as the Beilschmidt Border Regiment, take command even though it’s someone else’s unit, and is capable of boosting the depleted eastern front lines… The only person capable of doing this is…”

“What about the Fourth Army?”
“Even if the Germanian Federation attacks, we could use Fort Volks in a defensive battle. And we also captured the type 41 Elswick cannons too, so we won’t lose in a cannon shoot out.”

And some of the captured High Britannia cannon crew turned coat and joined the Belgarian Empire.
Getting them to fight their home nation might be out of the question, but they could be counted on in a fight for survival against other countries.

Compared to the defensive fort battle, the eastern frontline could utilize the strength of the cavalry much more.

“I heard the eastern terrains are hills and forest, so the cavalry isn’t of much use.”
“That’s true, if we launch an attack, we will have to fight in the forest

against the Estaburg Kingdom soldiers who excel in ambushes. That will neutralize the advantage of the cavalry. However…”

Regis laid out the map.

He proposed the plan of pulling back the defense line, and fighting the enemy on the plains.

After confirming with Coignieres, they had decided to focus on defence.

Regis already lost count how many times Jerome clicked his tongue.

“This doesn’t suit my character!”
“… But this is the most logical method…”
“Regis, you might be good, but you don’t have what it takes to command others.”
“I know.”

“Hmmp… You should get a taste of how it feels to let your subordinates take part in nonsensical battle plans!”

“Sorry, but I think this is the plan that will incur the fewest casualties…”

Jerome sneered.
“You really like to talk about logic, have no greed, and are too normal. You think the soldiers on the battlefield are decent people? If what they are after is ‘not to die’, they won’t fight in the first place. It’s useless to tell them that the plan will ‘incur the fewest casualties’, telling them it’s a plan where they can earn war merits will spur their morale better. Those with too much greed will die fast, but those without greed can’t become soldiers.”

Regis lowered his head.
It’s true that he didn’t have the mentality of a soldier, and won’t understand in a true sense no matter how many books he reads.
“… I will keep that in mind.”

“Hmmp… Well, putting aside what the soldiers think, this is better than a moronic plan that will lead to a mountain of corpses… And maybe they were influenced by you? Even those guys from the

infantry are getting cocky and discussing tactics.”

“Is that so?”
“In the end, even those illiterate guys are imitating you, and say that they want to learn to read books or something.”

“Read books!?”
This was a wonderful thing for Regis.

And he felt excited.

Jerome looked even more irritated.

“Don’t make such a pleased expression, the more knowledge there is, the more troublesome things get!”

“Ha, haha… Is that so…”
His actions influencing how the soldiers think, and getting them interested in words and books, that was very exhilarating.

The Imperial Fourth Army planned to spend the entire day resting, and set off for fort Volks when the weather cleared tomorrow.

And the detachment will set off to the east with the Seventh Army.
Fort Bonaire might be just a short distance from the capital, but the road had not been fixed and would delay his travel time. Even it was just half a day’s journey, setting off early meant he would return to the Fourth Army earlier. And so, Regis decided to set off in the rain.

Also, it would be better to collect information as soon as possible.

The rain fell intermittently.
Regis looked out to the backyard from the entrance of the central tower.

To go to the capital, he would need to set off from the north gate to the back.

He was now waiting for the carriage to be prepared.

Clarisse who was here to send him off came over.

“Regis, are you really leaving?”

She looked lonely.

It’s probably due to the fact no one else was around, the two of them stood closer than usual.

Regis didn’t want to go too —— But it couldn’t be helped.

“Because I have something I have to do in the capital.”

“Haa… What should we do…”

“I already made the necessary arrangement, Altina will definitely do it well.”
“Yes, Her Highness will be fine, she is my Princess after all… But if Regis isn’t here anymore, what should I do… I might not be able to live on…”

“Haha… That’s exaggerating too much.”

“If I don’t have anyone to tease, I might get bored to death.”
“You are just using me to kill time!?”

“Fufu… It will be a pity that I won’t be able to hear such a retort…”

“You won’t die just because of that! … Well, I think it’s a pity that I won’t be able to drink tea prepared by Ms Clarisse…”

“Really?”
“I won’t lie.”

“Is that so… Seems like I am just a teapot to Regis…”

“That’s not what I mean!?”

“Just kidding.”
“Hah… Really.”

Clarisse changed her attitude and looked at him seriously.

Her eyes looked a little misty.

“Regis… Please be careful… Before thinking about the Princess and the Empire, do think about yourself too.”

“Thank you, take care of yourself too, Ms Clarisse.”
“… Yes.”

Clarisse suddenly pulled away.
And lowered her head deeply.
As Regis was wondering what was the matter ——

“Oh! He’s here he’s here!”

Enzo walked over from the other side of the corridor.

“Regis, are you going to the capital?”

“Yes, what about you, brother-in-law? Want to travel together with me to the capital? It would be slightly further than making a beeline for Rouen city, but it would be safer with the guards.”

“Hmm… As for that… I have some jobs I need to do.”
“Jobs?”
He was a blacksmith in the city and wasn’t part of the military, and shouldn’t have the obligation of working for the army.
“Yes I know I don’t have to work in the army… But I can’t just abandon the soldiers who entrust their lives to their weapon in the frontline half way right? As the soldiers brought a pile of weapons for me, I still have to work on a lot of them.”

As a strategist, Regis was really grateful for that.
But as a relative, he was worried.
“Is this really fine?”

“Well, there is some problem… But I only taught the blacksmiths in the army halfway, and if I let them be, that might make their job even more dangerous.”

“Erm… I understand. But are you going with them all the way to Fort Volks?”

“They will be setting off when the rain stops tomorrow right? It can’t be helped then. And the adjustments for ‘Grand Tonnerre Quatre’

aren’t done yet.”

Now that he mentioned it, he did say he would need to work on the hilt to better fit Altina’s hands.

“Will your shop in Rouen city be fine?”
Enzo started muttering:

“I am worried about them too… Well, for the jobs my apprentices can’t handle, I told them to ask my brothers for help, so it will be fine.”

“Hmm? Brothers?”

Enzo’s only relative should be his elderly mother.

He waved his hands.
“No, not real brothers, it’s the people who studied under the same master as me, my fellow apprentices.”

“I see.”
“I have five brothers in Rouen city. Every one of them have excellent skills and is trustworthy, the people in that city are all like that though.”

He displayed his pride in his city.
“… As expected of a city of blacksmiths.”
“But, there is another problem…”

His confident expression withered suddenly like a dried up tree.

“W-What is it?”

“Hah~ … What should I tell my wife… And the kids are still young…”

“Ah—…”

“Do you think she will accept it if you send her a letter?”
“She won’t… I think she will go all the way to Fort Volks.”

“That won’t do! War is going to break out there.”

“I object too.”

If they needed to seal the Fort, there wouldn't be any guarantee that they could provide food for people other than soldiers.

And water would be a precious commodity in summer.

There might be an outbreak of diseases too.

Even if Altina receive her as a guest, it would be questionable if she could live there well.

Enzo started rambling.
"Hmm… What if I don't tell her where I am going?"

"My sister already knew that you took on the request to repair the Princess' weapon. If you are moving with the army, it would be easy to imagine which one you are with. And it isn't hard to find out where the Fourth Army is garrisoned. Unlike warships, this information isn't classified."

"What a headache."

"I will write her a letter, and persuade her not to be reckless."

"It's not too far from the capital, so if possible, please pay her a visit."

"I understand, I don't know if it would work though. You too brother-in-law, please contact her after deciding when you will return."

"That's true, I don't plan to die in the army. I will go back after finishing the other requests and the Princess' sword."

"Alright."

Enzo raised one hand.

"Then take care of yourself, we will probably be meeting soon."

"I will, please be careful too."

Enzo then left the corridor in brisk steps.

As if she was taking turns with Enzo —— Fanrine and her escorts walked over from the corridor.

Clarisse who was about to lift her head lowered it once more.

Regis nodded in greeting.

She responded politely.

“Ara, who was that gentleman? He don’t look like a soldier…”
“That’s my brother-in-law, Enzo Smith, a great blacksmith from Rouen city. He is modifying the Princess’ sword right now, and is also repairing the soldier’s weapon.”

“How amazing! As expected of Sir Regis, even your brother-in-law is amazing.”
“No, this has nothing to do with me…”
Those were probably just flattering words, but these compliments still made him itch.
Regis scratched his head.
Fanrine said apologetically.

“Speaking of which, did I made you wait long, Sir Regis?”
“No it’s fine, my carriage is still being prepared too.”

“Is that so… That’s great, I don’t want to make Sir Regis wait too long…”
“Ha, haha…”

At this moment, she looked at the surroundings.

“By the way, are the people sending you off not here yet?”
“There won’t be that many people, I am just an admin officer after all. And I am just leaving the unit for a month for my own convenience. It’s natural that no one would come.”

“Considering Sir Regis’ accomplishment, I don’t think so.”
“I am just suggesting things I already know, the Princess is the one who wins the battle.”

If the commander leaves the unit, even for a short while and it is raining, the soldiers will still form ranks and play bugles to send him off.

But Regis didn’t need such a grand farewell, and would panic if it

happened.

Fanrine frowned.

“How lonely…”

“Not at all, I can only work as a strategist because of the princess believing in me. Maybe if it is the Princess who is leaving, but making such a big fuss for me would be worrying.”

“Sir Regis thinks too little of yourself, I have only been in this unit for a day, but I understand how highly the soldiers evaluate you.”

“Even so… The only one who came is just Ms Clarisse…”

“Ms Clarisse?”
“Ahh, the maid over here ——”

At this moment, Regis realized he messed up.

Fanrine belonged to the Ministry of Military Affairs and is a daughter of grand nobility. Maybe she wouldn’t count a maid as a person.

But contrary to what Regis thought, she smiled gently.

“Pleased to meet you, I am Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde.”

“… Pleased to meet you.”
Clarisse said monotonously and bowed deeply. She gave an impression completely opposite that of Fanrine.

But there wasn’t any hostility.

Seemed like Regis was worrying too much.

Just as he was thinking that —— One of the escorts, a young knight showed a face of disgust. He was about Regis and Fanrine’s age, and his hair was styled like seaweed.

“Lady Fanrine, please consider your position. The daughter of a Duke doesn’t need to greet the likes of a maid.”

Fanrine looked troubled.
“Hah… My apologies… He is the escort prepared by House Tiraso

Laverde, akin to someone here to monitor me, so he is a bit overbearing."
"It's an unfortunate misunderstanding to think of me as being overbearing. I am just carrying out the master's wish that Lady Fanrine acted in a way that befits a daughter of a Duke House."

"Grandfather is overbearing too."

Fanrine sighed.
Clarisse kept her head bowed.
Regis started feeling bad about this.
Most people in the unit weren't concerned about this, so he forgot.
In the Belgarian Empire, there was an insurmountable gap between commoners and nobles.
Clarisse probably acted like a perfect maid in front of others in order to avoid such a situation, Regis felt he was too careless about this.
Regis pointed to the backyard.

"Oh, the carriage is here, let's set off."
Fanrine nodded, and the knight didn't say anything more.

They then walked to the yard.

Regis turned back to Clarisse who was keeping her head down.

"… Sorry."
He said softly.

But the emotionless Clarisse didn't react.

It couldn't be helped.

—— I will write a letter later.
When it reached Altina, she will pass it along to Clarisse.
Fanrine didn't wait before her own carriage, but in front of Regis' white carriage.

"Sir Regis! What a beautiful carriage!"

"Ah? Ahhh… That's a gift from Lady Eleanor."

"Ara, from my sister!? She already has three husbands, and to show such passion to a young man, how indecent."

“No, it’s not like that… This is a thank you gift for helping her during the Founding Day festival, and to strengthen her political ties with the princess…”

“Fufu… Sir Regis’ words are really interesting.”

“Eeh!?”

Did I say anything strange!?

She looked his way in the rain.

“Erm, if possible, can I ride in the same carriage with Sir Regis?”

“Eh, but the carriage over there…”

The carriage from the Ministry of Military Affairs was much more elegant than normal carriages, and was as good as this carriage.

Fanrine showed a lonely expression.

“Ah… My apologies for making such a rude request…”

“No, it’s fine… It’s a good chance, if you can tell me about the situation in the capital before we reach, it would be a great help. Do tell me about the Ministry of Military Affairs… At least those you are allowed to divulge...:”

Her expression turned into a smile immediately.

“If I can be of use to Sir Regis, I can tell you everything!”

Regis opened the door and let Fanrine board first. This was an etiquette all men of the Empire, even children would know.

Even if it was raining, he wouldn’t board first.
Regis then got on.

Fanrine sat on the seat facing the back, and offered Regis a silk handkerchief.

“My apologies for getting you wet.”

“Haha, it’s fine… I am a soldier after all, it’s fine to get a little wet.”

“Ara, how manly.”
“Manly!?”
This was the first time he was told that.

Fanrine was blushing a little for some reason.
They could hear the young knight shouting from outside the window: “Alright, move out!”

It seemed his attitude towards Clarisse wasn’t out of malice, but dedication to his duty. This meant that her escort was a reliable man.

After hearing the instructions of the knight, the driver spurred the horses to move.

The sound of trotting in the mud could be heard.

The carriage shook a little.

Regis was troubled.

“… That’s strange.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t see any soldiers…”
“Ah, so it is strange that no one is sending you off?”

“No, that’s fine, but why isn’t there anyone at the sentry posts?”
After passing through the cramped backyard, they reached the north gate of Fort Bonaire.
The rain splattering against the glass on the window was getting stronger.

Fanrine lift her waist.

“Sir Regis, look over there!”
She was facing the back from her seat, and pointed out the window —— towards the Fort.

Regis wondered what was happening and opened the window, then

looked out.

Bugles resounded.

On top of the stone walls of Fort Bonaire, soldiers with bugles stood in a row and played in unison.

It was the bugle call to send off a unit going off on a campaign.

And then, rows of soldiers appeared on the hills on both side of the road, the colours of the Empire and unit hanging on the top of their lance.

Abidal Evra was there.

“To our strategist, Sir Regis d’Auric ——— Salute!!”

The soldiers formed in neat rows on both side of the road straightened their backs, clenched their fist and raised the lance in their left hand. It was like the formation on the streets of the capital during the Emperor’s review of the troops.
Regis was speechless.

“… W… Why?”

“Of course, that’s how great Sir Regis’ accomplishment is.”

Sitting in her seat, Fanrine stared at Regis with the same eyes as her sister, ‘La Renard du Sud (the Vixen of the South)’.

Without regards for the rain seeping in, Regis watched the soldiers just like this with the windows open.

They were singing the military song to send off a campaign.

And yelled-

“Please be safe, Sir Strategist!”
“Thanks to you, we didn’t die!”
“Long live the Wizard!”
“You have to come back!!”
“Please grant the blessing of the gods to the hero who saved the Empire!”
“You are the best Strategist!”

“I love you, Sir Strategist!!”
“Don’t go!”
“Please come back soon! Promise!”
“Sir Regis, we will wait for you!”

It was a grand farewell.

Regis whose eyes were opened wide lowered his head slowly.

“... I don’t understand.”

“The soldiers know. Who is the one that allowed them to win.”
“The princess…”
“Of course, the princess did her part too. But if not for the strategist named Regis d’Auric, they would have lost the earlier battles right?”

Regis shook his head.

“Not at all, even without me… They will still win by some other way, the Belgaria Empire is strong after all.”

“You are too humble.”
“No. I… I didn’t do it well at all, I failed! There were more casualties than expected! In the end, I couldn’t come up with a battle plan with no sacrifices! A lot of people died, how can I face their families? I don’t think I performed well at all!”

Fanrine smiled gently.

“Sir Regis, did the people around tell you to… ‘think about the people who lived?”

“... Erm… I was told that.”
Clarisse consoled him.

Altina told him that too.

“I feel the same. Instead of those who have passed, Regis should think about those who were saved. For the sake of the survivors… And what will come in the future…”
“... This is the ‘right answer’.”
Regis understood too.

But the more he was complimented, the more Regis regret on not doing better back then.

As time passes, thoughts about ‘there was still this method, and that method I could have used’ started surfacing.

Fanrine looked out the window.

“Fufu… Being subjective is important, but accepting an objective evaluation is important too, even if it is better or worse than your own judgement…”

“Even if it is better or worse…”

She nodded and in her gentle smile, she hid her sharp eyes.

A woman with a unique atmosphere.

“Sir Regis, being highly evaluated means that others will have great expectations of you. No matter how unconfident you are, those who succeed would be expected to bring success the next time. Just like those who fail being looked down on, it is unavoidable.”

“… That seemed to be so. No matter what story it is, this will happen naturally.”

“No matter how confident you are of yourself, or the expectations others have of you… All Sir Regis can do is do your best. So, it will be fine to accept the expectation and evaluation others have of you, right?”
“… Ahh.”

It was pointless to state that he had no confidence before others anyway.

He couldn’t change the situation even if he had no confidence.

He would just be stuck before the problems he had to overcome.

—— What he should do was not to lament his lack of confidence, but to find the best solution for the next problem.

“Please puff your chest out a little more, Sir Regis. You don’t need to wave, but at least look at the people sending you off.”

“Ms Fanrine is a really strong person.”
“Fufu… Sir Regis, there are people in this world who have to shoulder heavy expectations the moment they are born. That’s why I have gotten used to it.”
“I see, that’s great advice.”

Regis finally lifted his head.
There were people he knew amongst the rows of soldiers.

A soldier with one ear —— The militia Ducasse interlocked the fingers on his hands as if he was praying, then raised his hands.

“Sir Strategist!!! Thank you!!!!”

It was an exceptionally loud voice.

He mentioned that he want to protect his family.

If the High Britannia Army marched into the capital, the surrounding nations would attack too. No matter the outcome of this war, his family would definitely be exposed to danger.
Regis successfully helped Ducasse’s family.

It was something to be happy about.

Even though the eastern frontlines were still in turmoil, they have successfully protected them from the High Britannia Army.

Regis protected the life of others.

He felt a warmth growing in his chest.

His eyes were heating up.
“... I, was of use to someone else?”

“Sir Regis saved the lives of the million people living in Belgaria.”

Fanrine said calmly.
Regis pressed down on his eyes, and trembled his shoulders.

After passing through the formation of the soldiers sending them off, the carriage sped up and head for the capital.

The sound of bugles grew distant.

Imperial Year 851, June 10th. Regis d’Auric left the Fourth Army.

The large numbers of street lamps illuminated the city in yellow light.

It was still a raining, but they finally reached the capital at night.

Regis looked out at the city through the carriage’s window.

“How nostalgic…”

“Sir Regis has not returned to the capital for a long time right…?”

Fanrine who was sitting opposite him asked.

“I did come back once during Founding Day, but there was a festival then, so the scenery was different than usual.”

“What are your plans for now? It is already late, it would be better to visit the Ministry of Military Affairs tomorrow morning.”

“That’s true… Anyway, I should spend the night somewhere.”

“Ara, you haven’t decide where to stay?”

“There’re people I know here, but going there all of a sudden will just trouble them, and I need somewhere to park the carriage.”

“Since you are a soldier, how about asking the garrison unit?”

“That’s the Imperial First Army here. I got in a skirmish with them just two months ago, I won’t have enough lives to survive there.”
“Now that you mention it…”

If Regis asked them for a place to stay, he felt that his room would be a morgue.

Just thinking about it sent shivers down his spine.

“I used to have a house at the corner of the Empire, but after I entered the Military Academy and my sister married, it was sold.”

“Ara, what about your parents?”

“They died from illness, something that is quite common here.”

“I see… Me too, my real mother passed away from illness…”
“Real mother?”

“My mother gave birth to sister Eleanor, me and my younger brother Roland passed away because of illness. My father remarried, and my step mother bored two more sisters.”

“Ah, I see…”
Regis remembered Eleanor saying her third sister was just eight years old.

Now that he thought about it, the age gap between the sisters were big, so it was the child of the stepmother.

At this moment, Fanrine looked out the window dejectedly.

“I shouldn’t be asking about someone else’s family… Is there anything bothering you?”

“Eh? Ah, sorry… I just…”
“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked…”

Fanrine waved her hands frantically.
“No, how could it be! I’m just a little concerned about my brother Roland.”

“Hmm…?”

“It’s a shame, I don’t know who he takes after, but my brother’s ideology is a bit extreme… That’s why he was studying abroad in the Kingdom of High Britannia.”
Not studying in Belgaria, ideology that couldn’t be mentioned and studying abroad in High Britannia…
“… He is a Liberal?”

“How troubling.”

“I don’t deny their perspective, they should be free to set their own values.”

“Ara! But Sir Regis is a soldier, and the strategist of the princess!”

“Please don’t mix them up with democratic revolutionist, although they are gaining influence… However, drastic changes will only lead to chaos. The country needs to change for the better right? Then there should be a need to reference all kinds of ideologies, so learning in different realms would benefit the nation.”
“Heehee… Thank you very much, my brother would be happy to hear that.”

“No, I just…”

However, Roland was studying abroad in High Britannia.
That was worrying indeed.
Although their forces near the capital had retreated, they had yet to leave Imperial territory, or negotiate for peace.

Right now, the Belgaria Empire was shaken from the death of the Emperor, while the High Britannia Army still have a sizeable number despite losing their supply lines. The war between the nations still rages on.
“He did write a letter…”

“Since you contacted him, then please be at ease.”

“Yes, I also reminded him to be careful.”

“You should be able to meet him soon, this war won’t last too long.”

According to Regis’ prediction, Latreille plans to end the war with High Britannia as soon as possible.

The tolls of this war was really heavy, recovering their battle potential should be their top priority.

And if Latreille planned to reined the nobles in, there would be a need to be guarded against rebellions.
It wasn’t really possible to plan a counter attack.

And they didn’t have the men to spare.

—— I want to hear what Prince Latreille thinks directly.

Fanrine clapped her hands at this moment.

“That’s right, Sir Regis, how about coming to my mansion?”

“Eh?”
“It might be a small place, but it has room for carriages, is near the palace and is very convenient.”
“Isn’t that… on the noble streets?”
“Sir Regis is already a noble.”

“No…”

The noble mansions around the palace were all extravagant as if they were showing off their power and authority.
There were guards everywhere patrolling the streets, and would glare at any commoners who came close.

It was true that Regis was considered a noble, but he still couldn’t keep his cool at such a place.

“It would be a great help if you agree to this.”

“... But why?”

“I was tasked by the Ministry to protect Sir Regis.”

General Affair Officer ‘protecting’ a Third Grade Admin Officer?

“I see… so this is surveillance?”

“The big wigs in the ministry seemed to be worried. They are afraid of Sir Regis who took down Fort Volks and achieve so much merit in the war against the High Britannia.”

“They think too highly of me.”

“Hee hee… Is that so? If Sir Regis thinks seriously about it, are you sure you can’t ‘conquer the capital with the Fourth Army’?”

“That’s a needless worry.”
Regis shrugged.

The people in the palace exaggerated rumours about him too much. It would be troubling if the war reports were treated as a way to kill

time by the nobles.

“No matter what, I was ordered to ‘stay with him until he leaves the capital’, so it would be great if you can agree to this.”

“Hmm… You even accepted such a task? Even though I oppose bringing noble prestige into the military, but Fanrine is a daughter of a Duke House right?”

“Ara? I already heard about Sir Regis from my sister Eleanor, so I know you are not as scary as the people from the ministry make you out to be.”

“… I see.”

“So I volunteer for this job when I learned of it.”

“You volunteered!?”

“Hee hee… Because my sister kept praising you, so I was interested in seeing how you actually are.”

She said happily.
Regis shrugged.

“... That’s really… You must be disappointed after seeing me in person. After all, I am boring and lack charisma.”

“I will keep my thoughts a secret for now.”

Fanrine winked when she said that.
The mansion of a noble might make him feel uneasy, but Tiraso Laverde was undoubtedly in the Argentina’s faction.

They would want to stop Latreille from ascending the throne, and will help in the collation of intelligence.

Considering how the knights of the First Imperial Army would feel, Regis needed to be aware of his own safety.

And there was also the matter of money.

Regis didn’t stay with the garrison because of his personal reasons, so he couldn’t claim his accommodation fees from the army, and

could only pay for it himself. If he stayed for a month in the capital's hotel, it would be a huge expense.
"... If it wouldn't trouble you… Then I will be in your care…"

"Ahh! I would be honoured to!"
Fanrine smiled like a child.

And as expected, the young knight watching over Fanrine objected strongly, but Fanrine refuted him by saying 'this is official business!'

The mansion of House Tiraso Laverde was very close to the palace. It was also huge, calling it the villa of the palace would not be a stretch.

According to Fanrine, they bought this place from another grand noble.
When they got near, a horde of servants came out to receive them.

Fanrine responded straightforwardly, but that was expected since this was her house…

The head of the Duke House and Eleanor seemed to be living in the main mansion to the south, the only member of the Duke House living here was just Fanrine.

"Please come in, make yourself at home."

"Thank you, Ms Fanrine."

"If Sir Regis is willing, you can make this your real home too."

"Ha, haha…"

What did she mean?

Regis was given the innermost room on the third floor.

Not only was it wide, it had a shockingly luxurious bed and work desk.

—— But there was no way to run.
It might have large windows, but he wouldn't escape unscathed if he jumped down—— Leaving Altina and Eddie aside, Regis couldn't do it.

He could only trust the people inside the mansion.

On the other hand, he didn't have to worry about outsiders intruding in.
After putting down his luggage, Regis laid back onto the chair.

It was completely dark outside.

Everything will start tomorrow.

He will rest for today, and start moving at day break.

"But before I sleep… I will read for a while. Just a while… Ahh, it's been so long—— Since I get to read this leisurely. Hah~"

In the end, 'reading just for a while' became reading through the night.
Until the maid came knocking to inform that breakfast was ready, Regis was completely engrossed in his book and didn't realize it was morning.
"Uwah, I am really hopeless!"

Even though he planned to collect information in the morning…
After changing, the maid brought him down to the dining hall.

The properly dressed Fanrine was already seated there.
She was wearing military uniform at Fort Bonaire, but had changed into an elegant dress that suited a noble lady.
This was probably how she was usually dressed.

"Good morning, Sir Regis."
"Yes, good morning Ms Fanrine."

"... Erm… Did you not sleep well? You have dark circles under your eyes… If the bed isn't comfortable, shall I change one for you?"
"No no! I was reading and…"
"Ara, is the book that interesting?"

"Well it's… normal I guess, I already read it three times during the

campaign.”

“And you still stayed up all night to read it! Why!?”

“No… My hobby is reading, because I never read it all in one sitting, I will discover new things when I re-read it.”

“How surprising, so you like books that much.”

“Books are great, I was hoping to be a librarian in the Military library…”

“As expected of Sir Regis, how studious.”

“No, I like entertainment novels, I am not reading them to learn.”
“Entertainment novels?”

“Yes. Ah~ it’s been so long since I visited the bookstore in the capital. I’m looking forward to it! I was thinking of going there at dawn, but now I think about it, the store opens at eight. In the past, I not only know the opening hours of the book store, I even know when new stocks will come in. But I have gradually forgotten after being away for so long. I shouldn’t be so anxious.”

Looking at the clock on the wall, it was just 7 am.

Book stores, galleries and jewelry shops targets nobles as their customers, so it wouldn’t open too early.

Shops with commoners as target audience will open at daybreak, and people will fight for spots in the open market before the sun even rises.
Fanrine was confused.

“You are going to the bookstore?”

“Yes, I plan on making a trip after breakfast.”

“Erm… That is troubling, if you don’t go to the Ministry of Military Affairs…”

“... Ah yes. Of course I will make a detour there after that.”

“The Ministry is about to open, if we don’t go before noon…”

It opens earlier than the bookstore? Even though their work efficiency is horrible, that place really is…

No no —— Regis shook his head.

The important thing is to finish the necessary task as soon as possible, collect the crucial intelligence, then hurry back to Fort Volks.

“Yes, you are right, we need to hurry to the ministry. We will make a trip to the bookstore after that…”

“Please calm down, we haven’t finish breakfast yet.”

“Ahh? Yes. Ah…”
The breakfast that was served was better than what he had in the palace.

Fragrant tea, bread with just the right amount of softness, honey potato, pieces of roast duck and fresh tomatoes.

It was delicious.

But despite that…
Regis didn’t taste it properly because he was too preoccupied with the book store…

The Ministry of Military Affairs —— Situated in a corner of the palace Le Brane.

By the way, there was also a branch of the ministry in the city, and Regis received his orders there in the past.
He was a Fifth Grade Admin Officer back then, and he was being reassigned.

But this time, he was being promoted to Third Grade Admin Officer, so he was summoned to the palace.
All around the room were unnecessary decorations.

In the middle were a table and two chairs facing each other, vases and sculptures were placed at the corners.

After a long wait, a strangely oppressive man—— Minister Beylard appeared.

“I don’t care if you are known as a ‘Hero’, or is well liked by the princess, I will not give you any special treatment! Rules have to be followed to form the foundation of the country!”

He announced right after the greetings.

Regis began to worry if he had been mistaken for a barbarian.

But what the minister said was correct.

“… I think so too.”

“… Yes.”

After that, he was given the book that detailed mandatory knowledge for Third Grade Admin Officers, ‘Experiences of a Third Grade Admin Officer’.

That was followed by a long lecture by Minister Beylard, as he read out the principles of an army that even kids would know.

There seemed to be a promotion exam too —— In that case, was this a test of endurance. Regis felt he would fail.

The effects of not sleeping the night before were surfacing.

If there was an essay, he could read it easily.

—— What a wonderful thing reading was, I can read at my own pace, skip the boring parts, re-read the interesting passages, and research things I don’t know. It was fine to drink coffee and eat bread while reading too. No one would complain no matter what my posture was, and nobody would question about my drive.

Minister Beylard sounded impatient.

“—— That’s all. Read the ‘Experience of a Third Grade Admin Officer’ thoroughly. There will be a promotion exam one week later.”

“What kind of exam is it?”

“Raise your hand before asking any questions, Fifth Grade Admin Officer Regis Auric!”

Seemed like he was bent on the term ‘official’. Regis who had yet to complete his promotion and nobility title was just a Fifth Grade Admin Officer and commoner to them.

Regis didn’t plan on being meaninglessly headstrong about it, and raised his hand docilely.

It was a funny scene in a room with just two people.

“… What are the contents of the exam?”
“Ohh? You don’t look motivated, but you are still interested on your promotion huh?”

Minister Beylard crossed his arms with a victorious smile.

Regis tilted his head.

“No, I am just worried about Fort Volks, and want to go back soon. I will be fine even if I fail the exam if I can go back.”

“Ughh… If you fail, there will be a re-test of course! In another week!”

“That’s troubling… Can you tell me the details?”

“Heeheehee, it’s not that simple. It will be about the content of the books, if you can’t remember the contents or answer the questions, you will fail.”

“Ahh, I just need to answer according to the content of the book? That’s great! It wouldn’t be a problem then.”
“Hmm, don’t look down on the exam, the book is 300 pages long! 300 pages! In a week!”

“I’m fine with taking the exam tomorrow.”
“Ughhh… How arrogant. There is also a practical test! Even though I look like this now, I was a palace swordsmanship instructor before. You don’t need to beat me, but you will need to show the minimum

swords technique expected of a soldier.”

“... Eh?”

“Hmmp, you think an admin officer just need to deal with paper work? However, to be a commissioned officer of the Belgarian Empire, one would need to know swordsmanship!”

“... Eh?”

“Well —— It’s really the bare minimum, people who can wield it properly can pass. I will abide by the rules, and won’t give special treatment either way, even to a commoner.”

“... I can’t do it.”

“W-What?”

“Erm… What happens if I can’t wield a sword? For example, swinging the sword and hitting my own knee…”

“Is there such a soldier!? That is a failure of course! He would be sent back to the Military Academy to study again!”

“... So it would be like that.”

Minister Beylard was right.

Regis’s result in the Military Academy was so bad that he needed to be retained, but he received a special exception to graduate because Marquis Thénezay recruited him as a strategist.

There was no doubt that he would fail the exam.

Regis was certain.

His path was blocked in a place like this because of the Belgaria Empire’s obsession towards muscles!
—— What a terrible country! I have to think of a way!

Wrong, I should work on my horrible swordsmanship instead.

Regis didn’t think he could do anything…
Only despair.

After seeing that Regis was acting weird, Minister Beylard was baffled.
“Hmmm? Ah—— the details of the exam is written in this book too, so read it well! That’s all, you may leave!”

Regis left the room like a soldier from a losing army.

At the Aristocrat Bureau next door, he was gently reminded for not responding to the summons.

And it wasn’t with a stern tone, but a polite one.

Instead of Regis, they were probably more wary of Altina who was backing him.

The aura of the Fourth Princess could be felt here.

In their eyes, Regis was well liked by the Fourth Princess, and was a young man who achieved merits on the battlefield.

So the Ministry of Military Affairs sent out an arrogant official to intimidate Regis and stop him from ‘getting cocky’, while the Aristocracy Bureau treated him nicely as a show of goodwill to the princess.

Just like earlier, he received a book here, this one being ‘The experience of a Chevalier’.

There wasn’t any exams here though, just a further answers and questions conference two weeks later regarding the content of the book and the mentality of being a noble.

Seemed like the nobility title would be settled without any issue.

But the practical test made Regis’ heart sink.

—— *It’s impossible for someone like me who isn’t fit to be a soldier to become a Third Grade Admin Officer.*

After leaving the Aristocracy Bureau, Regis found Fanrine who was

waiting for him in the lobby chatting with some friends.

She smiled when she saw him.

Her noble lady friends looked at Regis curiously.
The three bird like ladies covered their face with fans and whispered.

All the girls wore beautiful gowns like that of a painting. But Fanrine stood out among them she was graceful and gorgeous.

“Thank you for your hard work, Sir Regis, I was just talking to my friends about you.”

“… Me?”

“Hee hee, about Sir Regis’ brave tales.”

Brave!?

He was just having a headache because he couldn’t wield a sword!

“… Erm… Did you get it wrong? Is this a new type of joke?”
The laughter of the three girls sounded like bells.

Fanrine said:

“See!? Sir Regis is really an interesting person right?”

“Really! Just like Lady Fanrine described!”

“He is known as the hero of the Empire, so I thought he would be as scary as a lion~”

Just what kind of rumour is spreading in the palace? Regis was afraid to even imagine.

Speaking of which, Baron Vigeveel's work 'Twilight's Palace' did state:

“The ladies of the palace crave for entertainment to mull away their time, and will exaggerate the tiniest details. In just a week, a cat will become a tiger in the palace. They will treat men who achieve merits in battle like heroes, as if they were knights in stories, and fall in love

with them.”

—— No way, how can that be.

Regis smiled awkwardly.

Even though that’s what the book wrote, Baron Vigeveel was referring to strong and smart heroes, Regis wasn’t childish enough to overlap that image with himself.

However, she was surrounded by the three ladies before he realized it.

“Sir Regis, can you tell us how you defeated the High Britannia Army?”
“Eh? No… I wasn’t the one who defeated them…”
“Fufu, I never seen such a uniform~ There’s no frills on it, how refreshing~ So manly~”

“… This is the uniform of the northern units, I didn’t choose it.”

“Hee hee, it’s the first time I see a man who doesn’t brag… How outstanding.”

“Sir Regis is so sensible~ I really admire that~”
—— I can’t do it anymore.

As a way of socializing in the court, their compliment of men was as natural as breathing to them.

Even though Regis knew they were just flattering him, he still broke out in cold sweat.

“Erm… I still have something I need to do, so pardon me!”

He wanted to squeeze through the group of ladies, but they didn’t give way, so he collided into their breasts.

“Ah.”

“Ara! How bold~”
“Wait…!?”

The sensation of their fluttery clothes and soft bodies almost made

him pass out.

Regis back away in a panic.
Fanrine smiled wryly and said to the girls:

“Don’t tease Sir Regis too much, he is troubled right now.”

The eyes of the noble ladies sparkled.

“Hah~~! Even though he is a soldier, but he is like a puppy! How cute!”

“E-Erm, want to join our next party together~?”

I’m being adopted!?

In the end, Regis managed to get away from the hall of the palace with Fanrine’s help.

After coming outside, the smell of perfume dispersed with the wind.
“Hah… I was really lost…”

“My apologies Sir Regis. I didn’t expect them to like you so much.
“Well, it’s rare to see someone like me.”

“That’s right, normally speaking, soldiers are people who would wear uniform full of medals and love to brag their muscles and exploits in battle.”

“Haha, I don’t have medals or muscles.”

“That’s why they like Sir Regis.”

“… That kind of ‘like’ is a bit…”
He didn’t want to be kept like a dog. He didn’t mind following the orders of others, but if possible, he would prefer following someone with ambition —— Regis thought.
He remembered about Altina.

I have to write a letter.

As he was thinking about that, when he realized it, he was already walking towards the bookstore.

The gorgeous two storeys building facing the street had a green signboard with white wordings.

Countless books were displayed on the giant shelves inside the store.

“Wooohhhh~~~”

Regis felt as if he was going to melt.
He wouldn’t mind turning into air right here.

Fanrine looked around her curiously.

“Amazing, this is the first time I have seen a place with this many books. More than the books in my place.”
“Ara, there’s books in that mansion too?”
“Some are bought by my grandfather while others are received from business partners. Our family is dabbing into the paper manufacturing business after all.”
“Hee~ That’s nice.”
“My family don’t really read books. If you don’t mind, I can bring you there and let you read all you like.”
‘Read all you like.’

What wonderful words!

That’s the first time he was told that since Marquis Thénezay picked him up.

“Ms Fanrine, you are an outstanding woman!”

“Eh!? Because of books!?”

“Thank you! I will be counting on you!”
“Y-Yes… Sir Regis really like books.”
“I think of myself as an avid reader.”
The books in Fanrine’s house were very tempting.

But after leaving the capital for half a year, there were many serializations he had yet to buy.

Regis treated entertainment novels, theatrical plays, essays and all literary works had a place in his heart.

A line written in a certain work expressed Regis' feelings perfectly.

"How can I die before I read!"

That was how it was.

If possible, Regis wished he could read all the stories in the world.
He hope to have a place where he won't be disturbed, and flipped through the pages with these hands of his.
" —— Sir Regis? Sir Regis?"
"Ah!?"
"Erm, are you alright? If you are not feeling well, I will call for a carriage."

"No, sorry, I'm fine. I am feeling so blessed that I went on a short trip to dreamland."
"Is that really fine!?"
"... Maybe not, but that's the same as usual."

Regis moved fleet footedly around the store to browse the shelves, as if he was flying.
The price of all the books here had one less digit than the borders. It was still expensive, but that's how it was priced.

More importantly, it was well stocked.
He could find all the newest release of the series he was following.

There were several books he had never seen before and looked interesting.

"Oh no, is this heaven?"
"Sir Regis, what's that over there?"
"Hmm?"

Fanrine was pointing at the tea room.

"This store is also a coffee shop, so there are places like this. You can bring the books you bought over here and read them over a cup of coffee, a bit of a luxury."

“So that’s how it is.”

She looked at the area with intrigue.

“I will take some time, so you can have some coffee and wait here if you like.”
“... No need, I want to be with Sir Regis.”

“Surveillance huh… You are really passionate about your duty.”

“Not at all! It’s my personal wish to be with Sir Regis!”
“Uwah, hmm!?”

As they were speaking, Regis saw a familiar face in the store.

He raised up a hand.

“Yo, Ms Carol.”

“Eh!? Ah, Mr Regis!?”

The woman who was arranging the bookshelves with a serious expression jogged over.
She had black shoulder length hair, and wore a blue apron.

“Hello.”
“It’s really Mr Regis!? How could it be!? Are you translucent!?”
“Hahaha… I’m still alive.”
It was true that Regis would haunt the bookstore if he died.

That would bring a lot of troubles to others, so he should try his best not to die.

“You are really famous now, Mr Regis. Hmm? Ara, this is…?”
“Ahh, this is Ms Fanrine from the Tiraso Laverde Duke house.”

As Regis was introducing her, Fanrine performed a graceful curtsey.

Unlike the bookshops at the borders, many aristocratic ladies frequent this place, so Fanrine wasn’t out of place.

“Pleased to meet you.”
“Welcome, I am the shop owner Carol de Talleyrand.”

“This is my first time to a place with so many books, it really surprised me.”
“Ara, this is your first visit? If you don’t mind, please have some coffee. You too, Mr Regis.”

“Thank you, I will take you up on your offer then.”

Fanrine showed a surprised expression.

“... Erm… Sir Regis, do you have any special relationship with Ms Carol?”

“Special? Well, she is probably the person who knows me the best.”

“Best…”

“After all, most of my books are bought from here.”

“Thank you for your support. We have stocked up many of the books Mr Regis prefers recently.”

“Haha, I wonder if my budget is enough.”

Fanrine smiled in relief.

“I see, so you are a regular patron and the shop owner.”

“What else would we be…?”
Regis tilted his head while Carol smiled wryly.

The three of them sat around a corner of the table, the nostalgic smell of coffee made Regis close his eyes.

“Fu…”

“Mr Regis, do you know about this?”

Carol took out some books from the bag she brought over.
“Could it be… It’s Mr Cuers’s new work… the ‘Meteor Journey’ series? But that should have ended…?”

“Look over here, this is the short story collection after the series ended.”

—— A collection of short stories after the ending of a series! So that’s possible too! No, this wasn’t the first time.

“That’s really exciting, I will buy it.”
“Thank you very much… Hehehe, and this has just been released.”

“Eh? The sequel to Baron Mataseine’s ‘Tea & Sweets’!? Even though it has been two years since the last one!?”

“It’s a two volume conclusion to the series.”

“Hmm… My budget’s a bit tight, but the conclusion huh. I will buy it.”
“And this is the new serialization by Earl Redosel.”

“Hah… the Earl huh… Why don’t you finish your other series first. I will still buy it though…”

“Oh that’s right, and this new series that Mr Regis might like.”

“Hee~ a vampire participating in a play? And taking on a role of a vampire!?”

“A play inside a play, you like such settings right?”

“Hahaha, I can’t win against Ms Carol at all, of course I will buy.”

Fanrine was really surprised.

“Sir Regis, how many books are you planning to buy!?”
“Oh… Oh no, I was too engrossed. The books are important, but I

am here to talk about something else.”

“Ara, that’s rare. What’s the matter?”
“Erm… It’s not something I can discuss out loud…”

Regis looked towards Fanrine.

She was from House Tiraso Laverde, which belonged to the faction of the Fourth Princess and probably won’t get in the way. However, she also had the duty to watch over Regis.

—— So in the end, which side is she on?

Fanrine rested her body onto the chair gracefully, and laid her eyes onto the opened book.
The title on the book said ‘Dreamy Road’, it seemed to be a collection of poems.

“Oh my! such wonderful poetry. It's so entrancing that it's making me forget all about my surroundings.”

She muttered to herself intentionally.

So she would be ignoring what was happening here.

Regis turned to Carol.

“... Actually… I need you to investigate something for me.”

She turned her gaze to the surroundings, and no other patrons were paying them mind.
“If I can be of help.”

“Ms Carol has a wide social circle, and has many acquaintances in the courts. You also know many trustworthy people.”

“I don’t know if I can meet your expectations though? Among the people I know, Mr Regis is the most reliable person.”
“... Eh?”
“You are known as the ‘Hero who saved the nation’, ‘Wizard of the battlefield’, ‘Monster Strategist’, ‘The Princess’ Shield of Wisdom’... Titles that only appears in entertainment novels.”

“Hah——!?”

He yelped involuntarily.
“Hehehe… Even though you were called the ‘Green Turtle’ in the past. Ah sorry, I said something rude.”

“I-I will feel calmer being called a turtle… Hah…”

“To me, you have always been ‘the Avid Reader Regis’. So, what do you want to investigate?”

“... It’s regarding this.”

Regis clamped a letter between the pages of a book and handed it to her.
Carol opened the book and started reading the letter.

Her expression gloomed instantly.
“Wow… This is really incredible.”

“Please tell me if you find out anything. I will visit every day while I am in the capital.”

“I understand, I will wait.”

The important points had been written on the letter which were —— Investigate the death of the Emperor and Consort.

Carol didn’t have the power to investigate what happened in the palace.

But she had clients who perform business similar to a spy.

The bookstore was a place where all sorts of talent gather.

For Carol, it was ‘being proficient in remember the preference of patrons, and recommending books they might like’.
She didn’t simply sell books, and had deep relationships with many of the patrons too.

Tapping into her network would yield more information than planting spies from the Fourth Army here.

Carol changed the topic at this moment.

“By the way, Mr Regis —— Can you tell me about the war with the

Kingdom of High Britannia?”

“... Are you asking this as remuneration?”

“I am not going to force you but… A lot of people have been asking me about you after they found out I am on good terms with Mr Regis. For example, news reporters and the like, I feel bad about letting them go back empty handed…”

I see, reporters might have information related to the palace.

As they could be chips that could be used for negotiations, talking a little about what happened in the battlefield wasn’t a big deal.

“... I understand, but I am not as glamourous as the rumours say, they might be disappointed.”

“In this world there are people who find values in the truth over inflated rumours.”

“I feel the same. Creative works are interesting, but there is a need to find out the truth too.”

After that, Regis recounted his experience on the battlefield in as much detail as he could.
Carol started taking down notes midway.

While Fanrine read the poems collection quietly beside them.

Night——

When they arrived at the mansion, a horde of servants received them respectfully.

The maids came before them.

“Welcome back young lady. Welcome back, Sir Auric.”
As he wasn’t used to it, Regis didn’t realize for a moment they were referring to him.

“Hmm? Ah, that’s me.”
“Sir Auric had a visitor earlier in the day.”

“Looking for me?”

“Yes, they left this letter.”

The maid proffered a letter to him, the wax seal bore the mark of the Ministry of Military Affairs.
“… What is this about?”

Fanrine answered Regis’ doubts.
“I already reported to the ministry that Sir Regis would be staying here. If I don’t state the specific location, it might lead to unnecessary suspicion.”

“Ahh… That’s true…”

Her duty was surveillance, which include reporting Regis’ movement.

It would be troublesome if she reported the conversation at the bookstore...

Fanrine smiled wryly.

“I am not that stupid of a woman, as the saying goes ‘the cat that is great at catching mice will hide its claws’ right?”

“I see…”
People change when the situation changes, so there was a need to be on guard.

However, Regis trusted Fanrine. He couldn’t take action if he didn’t anyway.

He opened the letter.

It was a summons from Latreille sent out through the Ministry of Military Affairs.

The next afternoon——

Regis visited the palace once more.

Situated near the Ministry of Military Affairs was Latreille’s personal

office.

He visited it once before.

Standing before the large door were guards in light armour.

When Regis came near, they saluted.

“Third Grade Admin Officer, Sir Auric. Please wait a moment.”

“Ah, yes.”

After so many times, he had gotten used to others knowing about him.

This was the third time he visited Latreille, there were people who had seen Regis before.

After knocking on the door lightly, the guard reported the arrival of the guest.

The door then opened.

“Please enter!”

“Thank you.”

After returning the salute, Regis entered the room.
Latreille sat on a luxurious leather chair, all sorts of documents were laid out on his large work desk.

There wasn’t any chess board today.

He was wearing a steel forehead protector with his blonde hair draping over it.

Latreille looked Regis’ way with his crimson eyes.
“Pardon me for calling you in here, Third Grade Admin Officer Regis de Auric.”

“You are too humble, I should have reported here yesterday.”

“It’s fine, I received the report.”

The report submitted by Regis was on the table.

Did I miss out something? Regis was worried.
Speaking of which, he didn't mention how he dealt with the Mercenary King.
Dispatching a sub unit to the east was decided right before he set off, so it wasn't reported either.
"Erm… If there are any missing details, I will…"

"I see, but leave that for later—— Take a look at this."

Latreille pointed to his desk.

It was a folded map.
"This is…"
A map of the northwest part of the Empire, detailing Grebauvar fort city and its surrounding regions.

It wasn't as good as Fort Volks, but it was still a sturdily built city.

Latreille sighed.

"... I received an urgent report last night."

"What happened to Grebauvar city?"

"It has fallen into the hands of the High Britannians."
"Ehh!?"

It was a surprise that such a tough fortress city actually fell, but it was a bigger surprise that the High Britannia forces that were expected to retreat to the coast took a city as a base.

"There seemed to be flags from the Germania Federation amongst the enemy."

"They allied themselves? In such a situation… Unbelievable."

"Grebauvar was the homebase of the Third Army, but less than half of their forces stay behind for this campaign, which was a good opportunity for the enemy."

"That's right… But to fall within such a short time…"
"The details would be here tonight, but we can't just sit on our thumbs. There are a large number of civilians in that city, even

though the situation isn't clear yet, we need to muster the forces to take back Grebauvar."

"That is a given."

"But there is a problem. We can't dismiss the possibility that this is a feint, and that the enemy's real goal is the capital."

"That's true, we might find Grebauvar city to be empty after marching our forces there, only to find that the enemy had made a detour to attack the capital."

"At the very least, it would be great if the capital had walls."

The Belgaria Empire was powerful and it was impossible for the enemy to push near the capital —— Because of this arrogance, the capital didn't have walls.

After relocating the capital for three hundred years, the dignity still remains.

But because of this, the forces they could send to Grebauvar were limited.

Regis was troubled.
"You want the Fourth Army to attack the fort?"
"No, the defence of Fort Volks is important too. In the end, Grebauvar city is the homebase of the Third Army, and there are elements of the Third Army in the capital. There will be no debate on which units are to be dispatched."

"Yes…"
In that case, why was he telling Regis all that?

Regis continued listening silently while feeling troubled.

Latreille laid out the map and arrange the pieces.

"Right now, there are 70,000 men in the capital. The High Britannia Kingdom should have an estimated 16,000 men in Grebauvar, supported by Germanian forces."

"Hmmm…"

“Sir Regis, how many troops should we send?”
“Eh? No… This is hard to gauge, the enemy numbers are unknown too… Well, considering the defences of the capital, we need a force of 50,000 on defense at the very least.”

It wasn’t clear the numbers committed by the Germanian forces, but from past records, it should be about 20,000.

Considering the new type of rifles used by High Britannia, even though this would be a base defence battle, it would need 50,000 soldiers.

With such numbers, they could buy time for ally forces to congregate.

“As expected, we can only commit 20,000 men.”

“... It’s not enough to attack a fort, it would be better to lay a siege and cut off their supplies.”

“In the war against High Britannia, the Imperial Army suffered heavy losses. It would take years just to muster the forces to launch a frontal assault against Grebauvar city.”

“How about negotiating with them to surrender the fort in exchange for safe passage to the western coast?”
“Hmm…”
Latreille stared at the map.
This seemed to be an unpopular opinion.

“You are concerned about how the neighbouring nations would react right?”

“I won’t explain the details since you understand. With the passing of the Emperor, the neighbouring nations are all observing how the Empire would act from now on. If we show any weakness in the negotiations, there would be unredeemable consequences.”

“What about laying siege with 20,000 soldiers?”
“A base near the capital being captured… and we couldn’t do anything about it, how could we uphold the dignity of the nation?”

“That is… well, it is not feasible…”

“They must not see the weakness of the Empire right now. If they look down on us, the neighbouring nations would attack all at once. I don’t think we will lose even if that happens, but we have to avoid this at all cost.”
“That is a scary scenario. In order to avoid that, we should establish peaceful diplomatic relations with them…”

“Right now, we have to show them that the Imperial Army is still mighty. The relationships between countries can’t be changed so easily.”

“… I understand too.”
Latreille was adamant on taking back Grebauvar city.

Regis agreed too. It was impossible to build a peaceful relationship in a matter of days. Showing a peaceful stance would just make the other nations wonder if the Imperial Army had weakened.

Latreille placed his hands onto his chest.

“I plan to take part in this battle too.”

“You are going personally!?”

“Yes, I will commit the First Army and combine it with the Third Army that had lost its commander to form a 20,000 men unit.”

“You are planning to attack the fortress city with 20,000 soldiers?”
Latreille nodded to acknowledge this frightening fact.

Is he serious?

There were about 40,000 enemy forces outfitted with the latest rifles and cannons, and they were defending a sturdy fortress city.

It was impossible to win.

“Sir Regis once took down Fort Volks with just 2,000 men right?”

“… That was just luck.”
His back was drenched with sweat.

What a difficult problem, please work hard —— He really felt like saying that and leave.

Latreille stood up.
He walked around the large table and stood before Regis.

The atmosphere was different compared to when they just met.
Latreille seemed to be bigger, maybe the idea that he was the 'Emperor to be' influenced how Regis felt.

"Sir Regis, I understand you support Altina, and want to chase me off the throne."

He said it directly.

Regis shook his head.
"… The goal of the princess is just to stop the war in this country."
"We don't have the right to discuss the future right now, this is a crisis that would decide the fate of the Empire."
"That's right."

Latreille reached out his right hand.

It was the hand of a knight who fought on the front lines. The skin was hard, joints pronounced and the nails were thick.

"Let's set aside our differences for now. For the future of the Empire, can you take part in the battle to retake Grebauvar city?"

He wasn't lying.
The Empire could only mobilize 20,000 troops, they couldn't ignore Grebauvar city or enter peace negotiations.

In order to display their might to the other nations, they had to take back the fort with an inferior force.

That was why he asked Regis who accomplished something similar to take part.

He remembered what Fanrine told him in the past

"Being highly evaluated means that others will have great expectations of you. No matter how unconfident you are, those who

succeed would be expected to bring success the next time. Just like those who fail being looked down on, it is unavoidable."

Latreille continued:

"The large number of citizens in Grebauvar city probably didn't escape in time. We need to take back the city as soon as possible to rescue them."
"Ughh…"
"I am not asking you to change your position. You will still be part of the Fourth Army, and will just be seconded here for this battle. After taking back Grebauvar city, I will arrange for your swift return to Fort Volks. Your promotion and peerage matters will be settled in the battlefield too."
"Is that so?"
"I am the Field Marshal and the Second Prince, I have at least that much authority."

"Erm… Even the practical test?"

"There are no weaklings in a unit that attacks a fortress with a force of 20,000."
"Maybe I can't propose an excellent battle plan that is expected of me."
"Just do what you can in your capacity as a strategist, you just need to promise that. If we don't succeed, then it's my judgement that is lacking."

It seemed that Latreille wanted Regis to be his Strategist.

It was too much for a Third Grade Admin Officer.

Even though Latreille's adjutant Germaine was a First Grade Admin Officer.

But the exemption from the practical part of the promotion exam was very tempting.

More importantly, this concerned a large number of lives, although Regis wasn't sure whether he would be of use…

If he worked with Latreille as a Strategist, he would be able to

understand Latreille’s thoughts more directly than asking outside the courts.

If the plan succeeds, the public evaluation of Latreille would improve, but that would be an issue for another day.
It’s impossible to ask him to give up the throne now.

The most important fact was, if he became Latreille's strategist, he would be able to understand Latreille's future political plans and thoughts.

In order to find information that could light a path for Altina, this was a great position to be.

Regis decided.

He reached out his right hand.
“... I don’t know if I could be of use… But I will do my best.”

“Thank you, Sir Regis.”

Latreille’s large hand grabbed Regis’ hand.

It was strong, just like the great white mountain, *La Dame Blanche.*

Intermission

One would be drenched in sweat just by walking, the sun was intense, as if summer had come early.

Altina urged her horse Karakara forth, and looked back several times.

—— *As expected, I should have let everybody rest?*

The troops were exhausted, dragging their feet as if they were going to collapse.

But their faces were full of life.

Because they were going to reach Fort Volks soon.

The base they had left for over a month.

They can shower, sleep on a bed and eat the food they were

familiar with after they return.

Despite their fatigue, the soldiers had bright expressions.

Deeply troubled.

Altina was always troubled.

At this moment, if Regis was here, he would be able to adjust the plans for the troop's movement according to the situation. Thinking back, Altina had always left these to him.

If Jerome was here, he would be able to make the right call after seeing the conditions of the soldiers.

Altina didn't have related knowledge or experience. On the return trip after this long campaign, the season was rather hot. Even though she felt it would be better for them to rest, she didn't want to go against the troop's wishes to return home quickly.

She kept dragging the issue as she couldn't decide. Following the movement plan Regis made before he left, it was time for a short break.

Even when the soldiers heard that, they would just answer 'no problem!'. That's how they were.

But the 7,000 soldiers had to carry their weapons and push the cannons. Some of them were collapsing from fatigue.

There were casualties from the consecutive battles too.

The soldiers who couldn't keep up and needed to get picked up by the rescue wagons were more than usual.

Should she let everyone rest?

Or just carry on like this?

The soldiers walking in front shouted:

"I can see the fort——!!"

Wooahhh! Cheers erupted.

The joyous atmosphere was contagious, which made Altina smile.

But her frustration over her lack of experience as a commander clouded her heart.

She was only depressed for a moment.

Just treat this as an experience! Altina was someone who could think so positively.

The Beilschmidt Border Regiment left as a unit of 4,000, and returned as the Imperial Fourth Army with almost twice the numbers.

The soldiers came out from the fort.

Because a messenger alerted them that the unit out on a long campaign had returned.

The one at the very front was Evrard.

He was a tall and burly knight, the captain of the fort defences. He was over fifty years old, but still very energetic.

“Your Highness~~~!!”

“It’s been a while, Evrard!”

“Wonderful! Just wonderful! It’s great that you are alright!”

Evrard galloped over, jumped off his horse and got down on one knee.

His bald head was shiny as usual, and his beard was a mix of black and white.

It had just been a month, but it probably worried him a lot.

Altina dismounted too.

“You watched over the fort well, thank you.”

“You are being too distant!”

With a tremor of footsteps, the soldiers from the fort ran over.

The joy of reuniting with their returning comrades could be heard everywhere.

The Beilschmidt Border Regiment was originally from the Empire. They had acquaintances even in the Second Army.

There were people who met again unexpectedly.

And also grieving for the comrades who couldn't return.

Altina looked down at the soldiers around her.

"... Men, are not just numbers."

"What's the matter, Princess?"

"... I lost a thousand men from the Beilschmidt Border Regiment that left for the campaign. Even though they have their companions and families."

"I heard that High Britannia was using new weapons that had never been seen before. The Second and Seventh Army were defeated, even Prince Latreille was wounded. The enemy even made it all the way before the capital. Despite the hard battles, you still brought back 3,000 soldiers safely, that is something to cheer for."

"Yes… Even though I told Regis the same thing."

"The sense of responsibility and mourning for the men we lost isn't a bad thing. We are no longer on the battlefield. I may have overstepped my bounds, but I prepared a victory feast. There will be plenty of wine and meat."

"Fufu… Thank you. Let's go back to the fort!"

Altina mounted her horse.

Evrard rode beside her.

The bugles sounded again, and the soldiers walked shoulder to shoulder.

They began singing patriotic songs.

Altina asked:

“By the way, where’s Eric?”

Evrard who was smiling all this while became depressed.

He was full of life just a moment ago, and now he looked like an old man.

After reaching the fort, they saw a swordsman in black clothes and a silver haired youth descending the stairs.

It was Eddie and Auguste.

“Yo, Altina! You are back!”

“... It’s great that you are alright.”

Even though he was dressed like a man before the troops, Auguste’s real identity was Felicia.

Altina raised a hand in response.

A large carriage entered the fort. Clarisse got down and bowed deeply.

Eddie tilted his head.

“Eh? Where’s Regis?”

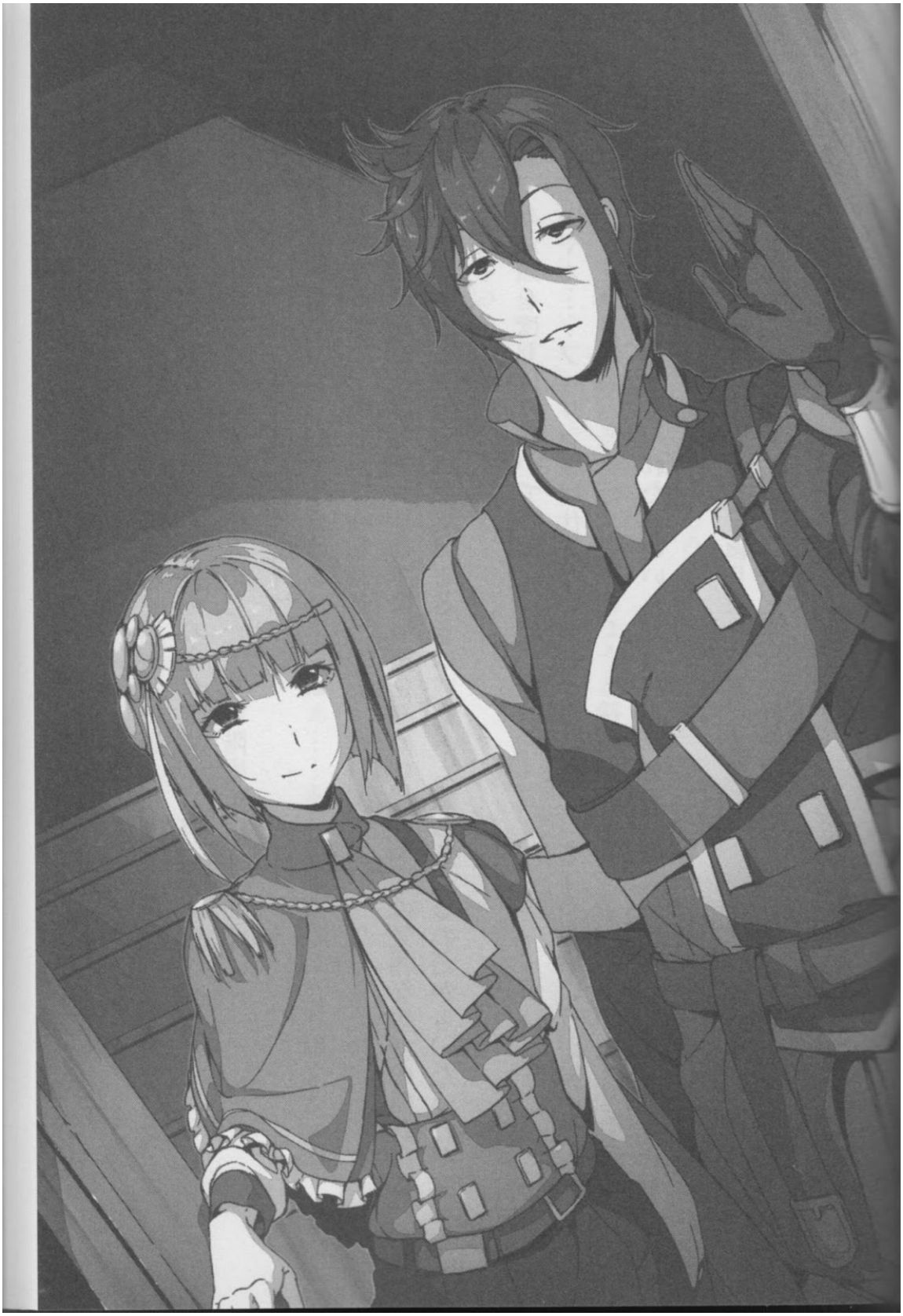
“He went to the capital for his promotion and acceptance of his peerage.”

“I see. That will happen after all his accomplishment.”

“Really! Right when the Germanian Federation is about to attack!”

“Well, the Empire had never been peaceful.”

“That might be so…”



Some of the soldiers led the horses to rest, some carried the wounded to the infirmary, and the fort became lively.

It would be fine to leave the rest to Evrard.

Altina walked to her room. And climbed a long flight of stairs.

“Eddie, Felicia, are both of you well?”

“I didn’t even catch a cold.”

“... Sorry, I caught a cold once.”

Felicia didn’t need to act since there wasn’t any soldiers here, and showed her usual frail and demure side.

When she was acting as Auguste, one could even feel a majestic aura, such incredible acting skills.

Eddie scratched his head.

“Ah, well… it can’t be helped for Felicia. The cold weather persisted longer than usual.”

“... I-Is that so?”

“It will be great if I can protect you from catching a cold. Well, if you are feeling under the weather, don’t be too concerned about anything and just rely on me.”

“Yes… Thank you. I will count on you like usual then.”

“I will make the cold days warm too.”

“... I’m so glad.”

Felicia’s cheeks blushed.

It didn’t suit him, but Eddie smiled with a gentle gaze too.

Altina felt her mood strangely turning for the worse.

She felt that she was an eyesore?

And sighed.

She shifted her gaze away from them, and looked at Clarisse who was walking slightly behind her.

“... Hey Clarisse.”

“What can I do for you, Princess?”

“When will Regis be back?”

“... I asked him, he said it would take between a week to a month. After finishing his business at the capital, he would need some time to come back here. It would probably take between 6 to 30 days.”

“Hmm, it would take that much time after all… Hah… It would be great if I could go to the capital too.”

Altina slouched her shoulders.

Eddie smiled wryly.

“What are you saying? The commander can’t leave her unit behind and run off. If you do that, it wouldn’t be your unit anymore.”

“Yeah... This is unreasonable, I know at least that much. But for some reason, whenever I see you and Felicia, I will feel the urge of wanting to see Regis! I don’t understand why though.”

“Hmm? But why?”

Eddie looked baffled.

Felicia who was blushing turned a deeper shade of red, and was stammering.

“T-That is… Sister…”

“Ara ara…”

Clarisse sighed deeply.

Altina parted with Eddie and Felicia in front of her room ——

She entered her room and wiped herself with hot water.

And sat inside a wooden bucket.

Clarisse soaked a silk cloth with hot water from a flask, and gently squeezed the water onto Altina’s skin.

She started warming up.

“Phew…”

“Your skin is really beautiful, Princess.

“Is that so? But I think it’s similar to Clarisse though?”

“Fufu, thank you very much. But the Princess’ skin is like a shiny gem. And it looks so tender and delicious.”

“... Y-You can’t bite okay?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. But… Such a day will come one day. Hah… My dear Princess…”

“I will be bitten? Don’t joke with me, I won’t let my guard down no matter who my opponent is.”

“... You said guard down.”

“Hm?”

“Fufufu… You don’t need to worry for now. Your Highness is really the Princess.”

“Hmmm?”

Clarisse became strangely happy, and wiped Altina’s body as if she wanted her skin to shine.

As if her troubles and filth from the long campaign had been washed away, Altina’s mood got better.

She sat before her dressing table she had not seen for so long that she was starting to missed it. Clarisse helped to brush her hair.

Altina giggled.

“Hee… Eheehee.”

“Your highness, does it tickles?”

“Not at all. It just feel so nostalgic.”

“That’s true.”

“Hey Clarisse… You will stay with me forever right?”

“Of course. But Regis will be back soon right?”

“I-I’m not talking about Regis!? Well, of course he will be back. He promised.”

Clarisse applied a thin layer of oil, and Altina’s hair was elegant just like her skin.

But it was a bit itchy and Altina kept fidgeting her body.

The victory feast began in the evening, the campaign group, garrison group and the former Second Army soldiers all drank together.

Even though training was the only way to improve the coordination between the units, this could deepen the bonds between them mentally.

Being happy about surviving, feeling sad for those who passed, the banquet lasted into the wee hours of the night.

It might carry on until dawn.

Night——

Altina visited Eric who didn’t attend the victory feast.

She found out from the lady doctor that Eric had recovered, and didn’t need to stay in the infirmary and was staying home too.

She knocked on the door.

“… Who is it?”

A response came from behind the door.

Altina took a deep breath and said:

“I’m alone, is it convenient?”

“Eh!? Your Highness!?”

A high pitched panicky voice sounded out, followed by hurried footsteps.

After the sound of the door being unlocked, the door was opened forcefully.

It was late at night, but Eric was still wearing his usual leather clothes as he stood there with his eyes wide open.

Altina smiled awkwardly.

“Sorry, it took quite a bit of effort to excuse myself from the feast. Were you sleeping?”

“Not at all!”

The candles flickered in the room.

Normally speaking, it was possible to make it through the night with just the moonlight. But Fort Volks was modified from a mine, so there wasn’t any windows for lighting.

The soldiers would use torchlight and candles to illuminate the room.

“I have something to tell you, is it convenient?”

“Y-Yes! I will change right now and visit you in the meeting room!”

“There is no need for that but… wouldn't it be better not to do it in the corridor?”

Sound would carry in the corridor.

Finally, Altina entered the room. Eric went down on one knee.

“For Your Highness to enter such a place is…”

“Well, according to the lady doctor’s report, your injuries have healed right? So I was wondering why you didn’t show up at the victory feast.”

“Ugh… M-My apologies! I should have put everything down and greeted you!”

“Alright, hearing flattery words too often gets kind of annoying. It’s

not something that could be done by my own power. Instead of that, I am more worried about your condition."

Eric lowered his gaze to the floor as he knelt.

Normally, a Non-Commissioned Officer such as a Fifth Grade Combat Officer would bunk together with others inside a large room.

However, Eric was assigned a personal room because he was Altina's Escort Officer.

Beside the bed was a nice desk.

If Altina sat at the desk, she would be looking down at the kneeling Eric.

In the past, when she visit Regis without invitation, he would sit on the bed and offer her the chair.

On hindsight, a Fifth Grade Admin officer acting so respectfully wouldn't be a surprise.

She turned into a strange person once again.

With no other choice, Altina pulled the chair before the bed and sat on it.

Eric, it's hard to talk like this, so sit on the bed."

"Eh!? H-how could I…"

"When it is just the two of us, it's fine to not be so formal. I didn't come here to make you kneel, but to speak with you."

"… My apologies."

Eric sat down cautiously and respectfully on the edge of the bed.

This was bought after they took down Fort Volks, not a straw filled mattress, but layers of cloth laid on top of a springboard. A high class item provided to Commissioned Officers.

He croaked a little.

Although Eric paid more attention to formalities than others, he

wasn’t that stubborn.

He must have his reasons —— Altina guessed.

It was probably related to Evrard’s gloomy expression.

“... Well? What’s the reason?”

Altina preferred getting straight to the point instead of going round in circles.

Eric lowered his head.

“Ughhh…”

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“Not at all!”

Tears welled in his eyes.

His shoulders trembled.

Altina waited quietly for his reply.

She was no longer a child, she will hold it back if necessary. Even more so for the sake of her subordinates.

Eric opened his lightly trembling lips.

“My left hand…”

“Yes. I heard that your wound has healed?”

Eric’s tears streamed down his cheeks.

“... I… Can’t be a knight anymore.”

He gritted his teeth.

And reached out his left hand.

His fingers were trembling.

“... I can’t… use any strength.”

His pale slender fingers were just like a girl’s.

But there weren't any wounds.

Altina reached out with her left hand and touched his fingers.

"Grip it."

Eric clasped his left hand with a pained expression.

It was akin to shaking hands.

He should be able to hold a mug.

But it would be impossible to lift heavy weapons.

Knights need to hold their lance in their right hand, and the reins with their left. If they couldn't muster the strength, they wouldn't be able to fight on horseback.

Tears fell from Eric's eyes.

"Ughh… Uuu… That's all I can do…"

"Is that so…"

"If… I can only use such child-like strength… I won't be able to fight. I can't be the Princess' shield, and will be a burden instead…"

He held back his sobs and said between snivels.

Altina held back with the same strength as Eric.

"B-But the lady doctor said the power should recover in two months…"

Eric shook his head.

"No… That's not it… She is referring to my shoulder… Even though it is recovering… But my fingers couldn't use any strength."

Altina had participated in many battles, and this wasn't the first time she visited wounded soldiers.

She met soldiers whose shoulders and back were hurt, and knew that they lost their strength in their arms and legs.

Even though their muscles were still there, there were people who couldn't move their fingers or even stand up.

Without understanding the reason, there was no way to cure it too.

Eric's grip was as strong as a child.

It won't affect his daily life, but he won't be able to serve as an Escort Officer, or even as a soldier.

Altina's hand that was holding him turned stiff.

She didn't know what to say.

"....."

"Ughh… Your Highness… I am sorry… I… I am useless now…"

Eric's shoulders trembled as he gritted his teeth loudly.

He won't be able to take the field like this.

He won't be able to handle the task of ferrying supplies.

Normally, he would be discharged and sent home.

But would this be fine? Regis said that if Eric hadn't been there, he would have died.

"T-That's right, if it was Regis…"

"... Eh?"

Eric wiped his eyes that had gotten swollen because of his tears.

Altina grabbed his left hand with both of her hands suddenly.

"I am sorry. Maybe I said something cruel. You can be angry for my irresponsibility and willfulness… but, I still think that Eric is a reliable Escort Officer."

"Y-Your Highness…?"

"During the Founding Day festival, Regis said that it was thanks to you that we noticed that Auguste was actually a girl disguised as a

boy. You also prepared the horses for our escape, and protected Regis during the fight with Franziska of ‘Renard Pendu’.”

“… Y-Yes.”

“I don’t want to lose Eric. Consult the lady doctor again. She just got back from the campaign, and has yet to diagnose your injury in detail right?”

“Y-Yes… But her diagnosis would definitely be that it is hopeless.”

“No matter how long it is, I will wait. And maybe Regis would know something.”

“Regis… must be disappointed… to see me like this right…?”

Eric looked really timid.

Altina shook her head hard.

“Not at all! Impossible! Regis won’t just sit and watch idly! Definitely! He will definitely say ‘I read about this in a book before’!”

“… Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Eric lowered his eyes.

And sighed.

“But… Regis he… didn’t visit the infirmary or came here. Did he already forgot about it?”

“Don’t be stupid! Regis went to the capital for his promotion and to accept his peerage!”

“Eh!?”

“Didn’t anyone tell you!? Sigh… But you didn’t ask either. I just came to find out how your health is. Oh right, I promised to write letters to him.”

“Letters? Your Highness… will be writing?”

Eric wiped his eyes and showed a shocked expression once again.

Altina frowned.

“What, I’m just writing a letter, why are you making it sound so strange?”

“I-I didn’t say that! It’s just that… I didn’t see Your Highness holding a pen much.”

“Even I can write letters. I already promised. I will write every day.”

“Every day!?”

Eric opened his eyes wide as if he had forgotten about his own matters.

Was it something that shocking?

How regrettable.

“Every, every day. First, I will write about Eric.”

“... Y-Yes… That’s right. Every day… I am a bit surprised. Even though the absolutely critical information would be written so badly that it makes Regis sigh…”

“Ugh.”

Altina averted her eyes.

She wasn’t bad at writing, but it was a pain sitting in a chair and only getting to move your hands.

Eric bowed deeply.

“... Thank you very much… Your Highness, for your concern… Just your words are enough to make me feel that it is wonderful that I became a knight.”

“Yes! And it’s not over! I have not given up! Be it changing the Empire or your issue!”

Eric had a baffled face.

News of the Emperor's passing probably haven't reach the fort yet, and Eric didn't know about Latreille's announcement on taking the throne.

It couldn't be helped since this was the borders.

Altina sat straight on her chair again and pondered for a moment.

"Errr… where should I start…"

At this moment, there was a knocking on the door.

Who could it be? Eric muttered and stood up.

Altina finally let go of his hand.

With his right hand on the hilt, Eric opened the door.

Standing at the corridor was Clarisse holding an entire tea set on a tray.

She was smiling.

"It seemed that the conversation would take a while. Would you like tea with sugar?"

"Eh… Ms Clarisse…"

Altina waved happily.

"Ahah, as expected of Clarisse! It's just nice, come join us. Let's write the letter together!"

"Ara, you seem to be having a wonderful time."

Eric tilted his head.

"Is this okay? Didn't Regis and 'the Princess' made a promise to write letters every day?"

"Ugh… I-It's fine. Right? The most important thing is to rely on your comrades. Challenging an opponent you have no hope of winning and fighting on your own is a display of courage right?"

She raised a finger and said in Regis' tone.

Eric and Clarisse looked at each other and laughed.

Why are they laughing——!? Altina thought as she pouted.

Chapter 4 - The Meeting of the Stars

“Bastian! I found a carriage!”

“Really!?”

He was just thinking that Elise was uncharacteristically late in returning to the meeting point, when she appeared with surprisingly great news..

Her blond hair swayed as she ran over.

She was really excited and out of breath.

“Hah, hah… There’s a carriage who would take this route occasionally, he said he would go all the way to the capital!”

“Ohh! We finally found one!”

Bastian and Elise was in Wollallen city that was 30 Li away from the capital Versailles.

Because the High Britannia Army’s invasion route cut across the middle of the Empire from west to east before heading north, this city managed to avoid the ravages of war.

And that was why a lot of refugees who were afraid of being implicated in the war escaped here.

Because all the rooms were full, a lot of people set up camp at the edge of the city. Tentages were put up and covered with cloth.

—— Why were Bastian and Elise in this city?

The Third Prince of Belgaria, Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria, kept his identity a secret and studied abroad in High Britannia.

And Elise’s real name was Elizabeth Victoria. Even though she was

named the successor by the previous Queen, the new Queen Margaret Steelart was after her life, so she was being pursued by the Royal Army.

After encountering all sorts of matters, Bastian and Elise started moving together.

And then, two months ago——

The Kingdom of High Britannia declared war against the Belgaria Empire.

The citizens were basking in the consecutive victories, but after they received news that the ‘Queen’s Navy’ had been defeated, news of further losses soon followed.

The names of the Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria and her strategist Regis d’Auric were famous in High Britannia.

Under the gloom and tense atmosphere from losing the war, public order in the cities deteriorated. The unreasonable persecution towards Belgarians had reached dangerous levels.

That reason, and also the fact that he became a wanted man made Bastian returned to the Belgaria empire.He also brought Elise with him.

Originally, he was planning to travel with a close friend —— Roland across the ocean.

However, in order to protect Bastian and Elise from a bullet fired by a ruffian, Roland’s short life ended.

“I will entrust this to you… in order… for the world to progress… into a place where everyone can pursue their… their own happiness…”

“I promise! Leave it to me!”

The only thing left In the hands of Bastian who fell into deep sadness, was Roland’s notebook.

They spent four days on the rocking sailship——

Passing through the surveillance network of the High Britannia Royal Naval, they finally made it to a harbour city to the southwest of the Belgaria Empire.

In this city, Bastian could only relay the saddening news to the envoy from House Tiraso Laverde who came to receive Roland.

Even though the envoy was saddened by the news, he still offered shelter to Bastian and Elise.

However, there was a goal in Bastian's heart.

It was just a vague feeling without any clear direction, but he couldn't hide in this place far away from the capital. That was what his heart was telling him.

Bastian's philosophy was to 'do it immediately when you think about it'.

After that, the two of them decided to head for the capital.

Elise also bore the thought that 'instead of living helplessly in seclusion, it would be better to understand the situation in the Empire'.

To be safe, they sent a message to the merchant Marbella who was based in High Britannia through the Tiraso Laverde House.

Marbella saved the lives of Bastian and Elise, and harboured them until he recovered. She even retrieved the 'Ring of the Royal Family' that fell into the river.

And she thinks that Elise was the one who was worthy of the throne, and promised to help in anyway she could.

We will definitely repay her kindness one day —— The two of them thought.

But now wasn't the time.

Bastian and Elise boarded the carriage heading for the capital from the harbour city.

The weather was great so their journey proceeded smoothly…

But when they reached Venomoth city, their journey stopped.

It was understandable.

The region around the capital had become the battlefield against the High Britannia Army. There was no telling how the battle would end, so a lot of people had escaped here.

No one wanted to head there.

They couldn't find any carriage that was willing to go there. They searched all morning, and the sun was about to set.

Was there no other way but to go there on foot —— As Bastian was thinking about that, Elise found a carriage that was willing to head for the capital.

Bastian paid them three times the market price, and boarded the carriage heading for the capital.

This is bad. The worst. Really the worst. Where did we go wrong? When we allied with the lousy High Britannians? When we asked to be the escort of the supply team? Or when we assaulted the home base of the Fourth Army?

Things were going so well before…

My mood is so bad that even the best dishes would be thrown onto the ground by me right now.

So in the end, the reason we failed is because I didn't kill the Belgarian Princess?

"… Damn it."

"… Fran?… Are you alright?"

As she was looking down and muttering, a concerned voice rose beside her.

Franziska sighed.

“I’m always fine alright? Be it walking or breathing. And also, being cute.”

“… Oh. If you keep talking to the ground, fairies will come out.”

“I can’t see them anyway.”

“Ara, then it’s better not to say too much, they will suck away your life force.”

“Ehhh!?”

“Look up when you are walking.”

The woman who was talking with a serious expression was her elder sister Jessica.

With her light coloured hair, pale skin and slender limbs, she didn’t look like a mercenary at all.

But she was a member of the ‘Renard Pendu’, known as the ‘Magician’.

The other person traveling with them was their youngest sister Martina.

She was just ten years old, and looked younger than other children of this age. Her ponytail on both sides of her head resembled Franziska.

“Sister is cute——”

“Uwah~ alright alright! Martina is really cute too~!”

Martina squinted her eyes because it felt itchy when Franziska ruffled her head.

The three of them walked along the road on the hilly region.

That night ——

Even though there wasn’t any rain, there was a huge fog, and the advantage of the new rifles was gone.

The supply team was destroyed by the enemy cavalry.

The moment the fog rose, Gilbert judged that it was impossible to guard the supply team, and led all the elites of the ‘Renard Pendu’ mercenary band to assault the enemy headquarters.

With a total of 16,000 men, even if the enemy used half of their forces to attack, there would still be 8,000 men left in the headquarters.

There were only 300 mercenaries.

It was a despairingly hopeless battle.

And of course, Franziska wanted to go too —— But Gilbert ordered:

“You will escort the two of them to the rendezvous point first.”

“Why!? I can fight too!”

“Of course I know that! That’s why I gave you this escort mission!”

He had an intimidating aura that wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He was serious.

And there wasn’t time to debate.

Their mercenary comrades also showed smiles that didn’t suit them.

“We will leave our ‘Magician’ to you, Franziska.”

“Protect your little sister too.”

“We will return victorious soon, so prepare a meal and wait for us!”

Don’t call my name without honorifics, I am not your wife or your mother! Cook for you, are you kidding me!? I am only doing this because it’s my brother’s orders!

She cursed as she saw them off.

Franziska knew that she won’t see many of her comrades again.

But if it was Gilbert, he will make it work.

He will turn this despairing battle into success.

She believed in him.

But reality wasn't like a fairy tale.

—— The plan failed, and Gilbert was taken prisoner.

'Renard Pendu' was wiped out.

Franziska brought the two of them and left the rendezvous point.

And kept walking along the road.

Tracking the Imperial Fourth Army that captured their brother Gilbert on foot.

Because an entire army was marching, there was countless footprints and wheel tracks on the ground. To their left was a vast forest.

Franziska sighed.

"... Well, it would be better to save them soon."

Franziska thought that if she acted alone at night, she could avoid the sentries and sneak to where Gilbert was held captive.

If she could undo Gilbert's bonds, he would be able to rescue the other captured comrades. At the very least, they would be able to escape.

But Jessica shook her head.

"... You will just lose your life."

She could prophesize the future by reading the stars.

She also made the 'unfavourable' prediction for this war.

That might be so, but the Germanian Federation didn't have any major civil war that required the service of 'Renard Pendu', and the rewards offered by the High Britannia Kingdom was very enticing.

Jumping right into danger for their livelihood was normal for

mercenaries. Even now, Franziska didn't think Gilbert's original judgement was wrong.

But ignoring Jessica's prediction still spooked her even now.

"Ughh… But, we are just tracking them from behind. The army will reach the capital soon… Maybe big brother will…"

She heard that the Imperial Army would hang the mercenaries they capture.

Gilbert might be executed at this very instant —— Just thinking about that made Franziska lose her breath.

Martina looked worried.

Jessica looked towards the sky.

The sun was shining from the west onto their backs, casting a long shadow onto the ground.

And of course, it was impossible to see the stars at this time.

But she still muttered to herself:

"… It will be fine to follow this path."

"What did you say!?"

"… Follow big brother… That's what the stars are telling me."

"The stars during the day, and they are talking to you!? Ahh, really! Divination and things like that are not to be trusted!"

"… This is astrology, a branch of study."

"Hah~"

"Cheer up, sister——"

"Only Martina can heal my heart."

"… Don't worry, the Fourth Princess won't execute big brother."

"Why are you so certain? Did you ask the stars again?"

“... If she wanted to, she would have killed him the day they took him prisoner… The struggle for the throne between the Fourth Princess and Second Prince is heating up, and the Princess is at a disadvantage… She would need more strength.”

Jessica wasn’t just proficient in astrology, she also had the talent of a strategist.

That’s why Franziska fought off the urge to infiltrate the Fourth Army’s camp despite her frustrations.

“… Hmm?”

They could hear the sound of horse hooves in front of them.

Were it the Empire’s patrol? Franziska grew tense as she thought about that.

At the same moment, the sound of horses galloping approached from behind.

“Tch… Pincer attack!?”

Franziska loaded the crossbow on her waist and held it at the ready.

“What?”

Jessica tilted her head.

Even though she could see the future, she was slow to react to the crisis before her.

Army patrols won’t do a pincer attack on the main road like this. It wasn’t a place where travelers and merchants loiter.

Franziska said with disgust.

“Bandits!”

“Ehh!?”

Martina was frightened but still reached for the dagger at her waist. Despite being a child, she was still an apprentice mercenary trained by the fierce ‘Renard Pendu’. She won’t lose to normal soldiers.

But it would be another story if the enemy had numbers.

The sound of the hooves suggested just that.

“Run into the wood!”

“… There are probably people hiding there.”

When she heard that Franziska searched for signs of them. But she couldn’t find any.

“Where are they!?”

“… If Franziska couldn’t find them, it would be impossible for me right? But they really are there.”

“Wait, this isn’t the time for jokes…!!”

They saw the people who rode in on horses from both sides of the road.

As expected, they were bandits.

At this moment, Franziska understood who the people emerging from the woods were.

She cursed in her heart.

—— *This is the worst!*

Like Jessica said, even the bandits foresaw that their prey might run into the woods and set up an ambush there.

They didn’t have the right side.

But there was only hills as far as their eyes could see.

Even if they ran there, they would be caught by the horsemen in no time.

“Tch…”

There were less than 30 bandits. But it was a large number to surround three women and children.

Franziska glanced at the enemy.

She didn't have enough bolts.

—— *Damn it damn it damn it, this is the worst!*

The enemy was twice the number of her bolts.

If she was alone, Franziska just needed to snatch a horse, then shoot to injure the horse of any pursuers.

But Jessica couldn't ride a horse. Martina wasn't proficient, and was still in training.

"As expected, astrology is a sham… I will tell big brother next time."

"... Isn't this strange?"

"The thing that is strange is big sister's brain!"

The horses of the bandit neighed.

A bulky man riding a huge horse looked down at them. He had a scar on his face, and looked like a veteran mercenary.

So this guy is the leader huh.

The bearded man breathed out foul air.

"Oh, so you are from 'Renard Pendu'!"

"What!?"

They knew who we were!? Franziska widened her eyes.

The leader smirked.

"When I was in the Germanian Federation, I was in the same camp as you! I heard your famous band lost to the Empire, and my patriotism pushed me to hunt down you lot. I hit the jackpot!"

His minions around him laughed sinisterly.

What patriotism! They are just beasts hunting down the remnants of defeated mercenaries!

Franziska cursed at them in her heart.

But the situation was dire.

The enemy were mercenaries turned bandits, numbered more than her bolts, and showed no signs of being careless despite facing only women.

They hated the fame of ‘Renard Pendu’ that much…

Take the leader hostage?

No, they don’t seem to value the life of the leader.

What if they attack Jessica and Martina in the meantime?

Her back shivered.

An enemy readied his bow.

And the one he aimed at was Martina!?

“Stop!”

Franziska stood before Martina to protect her.

Laughter broke out among the bandits.

The leader rubbed his belly and said:

“Is that enough? There are archers behind you too.”

“Ughh!?”

A bandit behind her also nocked an arrow. He was aiming at Martina too.

There were four bowmen in front, and three behind!

She couldn’t defend!

If she was alone, Franziska was confident in dodging the attacks and retaliate with her crossbow.

But before she could kill everyone —— No matter what happens, Martina would be shot.

Her hands holding her crossbow shivered.

She didn't make any large movement, but her breathing was hard.

"Stop… Stop… Stop it! Don't take my family from me!"

"Are you kidding me, you mercenary! The soldiers you killed have family too. Become our lunch here then!"

"Ughh…"

"Put your weapon down! I might spare your life if you do that!"

"Ughh…"

Franziska teared up from her anger.

But she had no means of resisting.

She put her readied crossbow by her feet.

And raised both hands in surrender.

Her crying face spread to Martina.

S-Sister…"

"I'm sorry… Sorry… I… Big Brother asked me to protect you… But I couldn't do anything."

Jessica looked to the sky.

It was harder to tell how she felt from her expression.

Even though she was known as the 'Magician', she couldn't come up with a way to turn the tide.

What would happen next? Become their minion? Or sold to the Imperial Army? The leader snorted.

"Franz, next… take off your clothes."

"Hah!?"

"Well? You want me to kill you one by one?"

“… You bastard!”

This was the first time in Franziska’s life that she felt such incredible bloodlust. Fireworks were blowing up in her brain.

The leader narrowed his eyes.

“Hey, shoot the smallest one.”

His minion laughed happily and pulled his bow.

Martina screamed in terror.

Franziska could only roar angrily.

“Stop it!”

“You understand the position you are in, mercenary? You get it now? Ahhh?”

“Ugh… Uuu… I, I know already!”

She removed her light armour.

It fell to the ground with a clank.

She removed the strings on her forearms.

And revealed her arms.

The gawking bandits felt disgusting.

I will shoot you through the eyeballs and kill you —— Franziska swore.

She loosened the ribbons on her chest. The strings on her back loosened too, and her clothes fell onto the ground.

After seeing Franziska in her underwear, the bandits howled ferally.

Franziska felt a different sense of danger from the battlefield, as if bugs were crawling towards her.

Her shoulders trembled.

She wasn’t sure if it was because of the shame or her hate.

She could taste the blood from biting her lower lips.

Jessica said slowly.

“… I am sorry… He came later than I expected.”

“Hah?”

Franziska couldn’t spare the effort to understand her vague words.

But even so, she regained her composure to notice someone running in the woods.

—— *What is that!?*

That was someone who was faster than the swiftest mercenary in ‘Renard Pendu’. It was hard to imagine that was a human.

That person didn’t fear about being surrounded by bandits, and leapt right in.

A youth with brown hair ——

His eyes were crimson.

He looked about Franziska’s age, which was about 16.

But his movement was so fast that time in the surrounding seemed to have stopped.

The bandits probably didn’t see because they were laughing despicably as they watched Franziska took her clothes off —— They finally noticed him when he stood before them.

The youth with brown hair and crimson eyes stood beside Franziska.

The leader yelled.

“Kisama, who are you!?”

“I should be the one asking, what are the lot of you doing? A group surrounding a girl and bullying her… I will listen to what you have to say before beating all of you up, so explain yourself!”

Haha, the bandits laughed.

The leader rubbed his stomach.

“The reason? Because… We are bandits! Moron! What can you do alone!? Are you here to die!?”

Franziska gritted her teeth.

She held hope for an instant when she saw his incredible movements…

But the situation was still the same.

In the end, if they were shot from the front and back, it would still end the same.

The other party knew too.

“Hey! Men are useless, kill him!”

After hearing the command of the leader, a bandit notched an arrow.

“Puuahhh!?”

That bandit spew blood.

—— What happened!?

Most of the bandits couldn’t understand what was happening despite it occurring right before their eyes.

Franziska could barely keep up. The youth beside her seemed to have thrown something out.

In the chest of the bandit vomiting blood was a fruit knife.

Throwing knife!?

Both the distance and speed was unusual.

The youth glared around him coldly.

“… I won’t hold back when protecting someone. In order to keep others safe from murderers, I have the resolve to kill.”

Instead of telling it to the bandits, he was actually telling it to himself.

The leader yelled.

“Ugh… Don’t take us for fools! I will kill you——!!”

As if they were kicked in the back by that order, the bandits readied their bows.

Knives flew towards their chests.

The bandits who guarded their chest with their arms were stabbed in the throat by a second knife.

As if he had grasped the movement of everyone on scene. Even though it was a pincer attack——

The four men in front and three behind.

Before they could pull their bows, the youth had thrown eight knives.

Even Franziska couldn’t keep up with his movement.

She wasn’t certain if her brother Gilbert or Duke Balzac she fought in Fort Volks were that fast.

Knives were the fastest weapon of all, but that was still very incredible.

Even though she was the one being saved, Franziska couldn’t stop trembling.

But Franziska wasn’t a normal girl who could only watch idly.

She kicked up the crossbow on the ground, and pulled the trigger once she grabbed it.

A needle like bolt flew out.

Towards the head of the leader.

“Ahh!?”

Blood splattered.

The leader of the bandits flipped backwards off the horse. With a bolt through his eye.

Franziska fulfilled her promise to herself.

The bandits screamed and started fleeing.

—— I will kill you all!

A second bolt was loaded.

But the bandits either escaped on horseback or fled into the woods. As expected of bandits, they were fast in running away.

No one was left.

“Mister, thank you——!!”

A little girl suddenly hugged him.

“Uwaahhh!?”

Bastian panicked.

It was a surprise to be hugged so suddenly, but being pounced on by such a young child was unexpected.

“Eheehee! I am Martina! What about you Mister!?”

“I am Bastian.”

“Thank you Mister Bastian!”

“Are you hurt?”

“Nope!”

The young girl who was about Bastian’s age lowered her head a little.

“... Erm… Thank… Thank you…”

Honestly speaking, Bastian didn’t know where to look.

Judging from her skills with a crossbow, he couldn’t let his guard

down. But Bastian still felt too embarrassed to look at her.

“Anyway, put on your clothes first.”

“Ughh!? D-Don’t look here! Pervert! Even though no one but big brother saw me like this before!”

“I am not thinking about that!?”

Seemed like there was no need to worry for now.

The girl picked up her clothes and tied her ribbon frantically.

She wore her light armour with deft movements.

And then, the woman who seemed the oldest with a calm aura bowed deeply.

“... My deepest thanks. I am Jessica.”

“What a crisis to be surrounded by bandits.”

“... That’s true, but thanks to that, we get to meet Sir Bastian.”

“Me?”

He tilted his head.

The girl who dressed herself as fast as she could interrupted.

“Bastian huh!? You are running in the forest all this while? Are you really human? That speed is too incredible right!?”

“Haha… I heard sound of horse trots when I was traveling on the road in a carriage. To be safe, I move on ahead to check the situation. I told them to catch up slowly, so they should be here now…”

He checked down the road, and saw a carriage approaching.

It was the carriage they hired at Venomoth.

Elise leaned out from the cargo section and waved.

When they reached, she didn’t wait for the carriage to stop

completely before jumping off and running over.

“Bastian!”

“Hey, that’s dangerous?”

“E-Erm… Who are they…!?”

“Actually, they were surrounded by bandits——”

Bastian recounted how he met them.

Jessica and Martina introduced themselves again, Elise also introduced herself as ‘overseas student from High Britannia’.

Jessica said to the girl with crossbow.

“... Introduce yourself properly alright?”

“Ugh… I, I got it. Erm… I am Franziska!”

“I see. You are unhurt?”

“Sort off. But I was so angry that I could die.”

“Ohh.”

Jessica asked calmly:

“... Sir Bastian, where are you headed?”

“I plan to go around the battlefield and head for the capital. I don’t know how the situation ahead is though.”

“... Well, what a coincidence. We are heading for the capital too.”

“Sis!?”

Seeing Franziska so surprised, Jessica gave her a look and didn’t say anything.

Bastian tilted his head.

“What’s the matter?”

“... Nothing, Franziska is just a little spooked because we were just

attacked by bandits.”

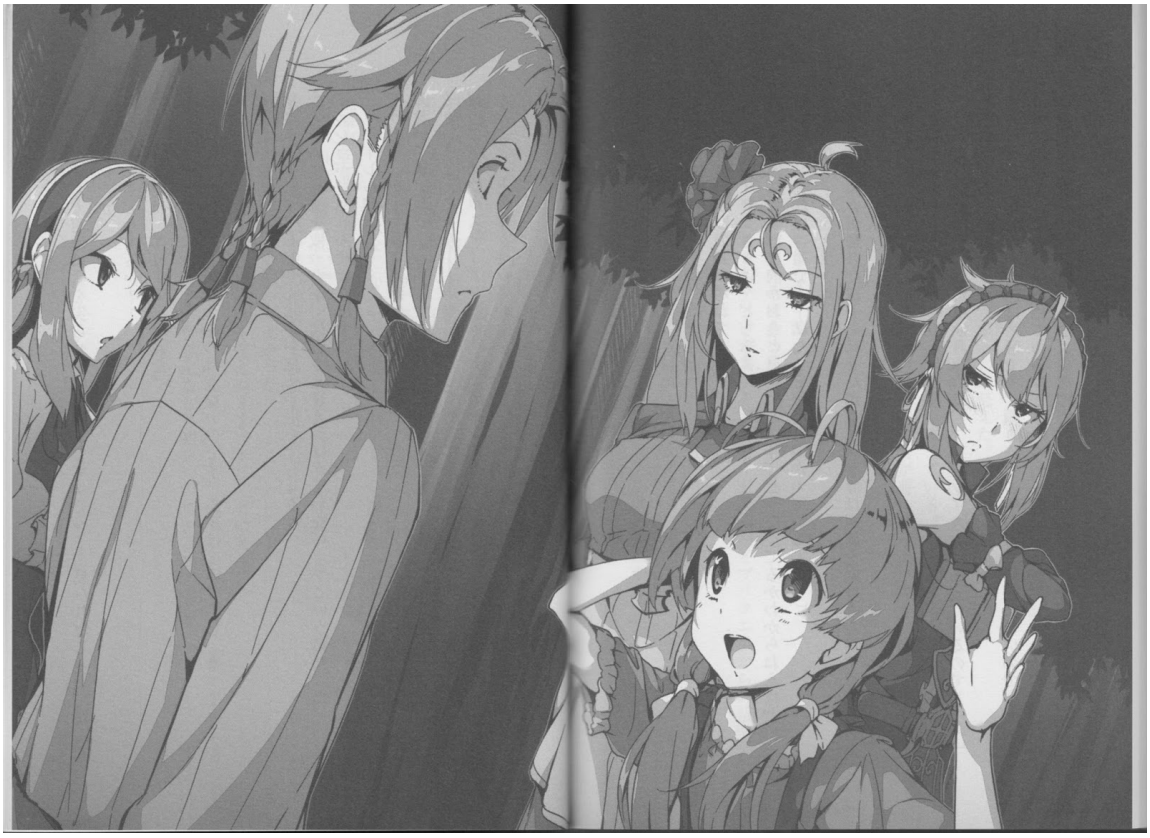
“Ahh, I understand.”

“… However, it is a little dangerous for three woman to travel on their own. It would be great if a reliable man could accompany us.”

Jessica looked up at Bastian slightly.

Martina also looked up with her big eyes as if she was expecting something.

Only Franziska was pouting, muttering ‘Ughh… He saw me.” with her cheeks red.



“Erm… What should we do?”

Bastian asked Elise.

She said matter of factly:

“It’s true that it’s dangerous for an all female group traveling by themselves. The carriage is spacious, so it’s fine for them to board!”

“Will it be a problem?”

“For the driver, the more passengers there are, the merrier it is.”

He asked to be safe and received the reply —— It’s fine as long as you pay.

Jessica took out an unfamiliar currency.

“… Thaler silver coins?”

That seemed to be Germanian currency.

The driver agreed.

And so it turned out like this —— The trio also boarded the carriage.

Bastian and Elise sat side by side at the right side of the luggage compartment, while Jessica’s group sat on the left.

With a crack, the carriage moved again.

Bastian looked down the road.

“According to the driver, we will reach the region that is probably a war zone in another day, so we will be making a detour. We should reach the capital in another three days.”

Jessica nodded.

Martina seemed to be sleepy because of fatigue.

Franziska seemed to be troubled and looked sullen.

The carriage advanced slowly on the road.

The sun setted behind the hills to the west.

They started making camp before it was completely dark.

It was great that they had the idea that more would be better when they procured food.

Jessica asked Elise with her unchanging mask like expression:

“… By the way… Why did you lie about being a student studying

abroad?”

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覇剣の皇姫
アルティーナ
VIII
ALTINA
the Sword Princess